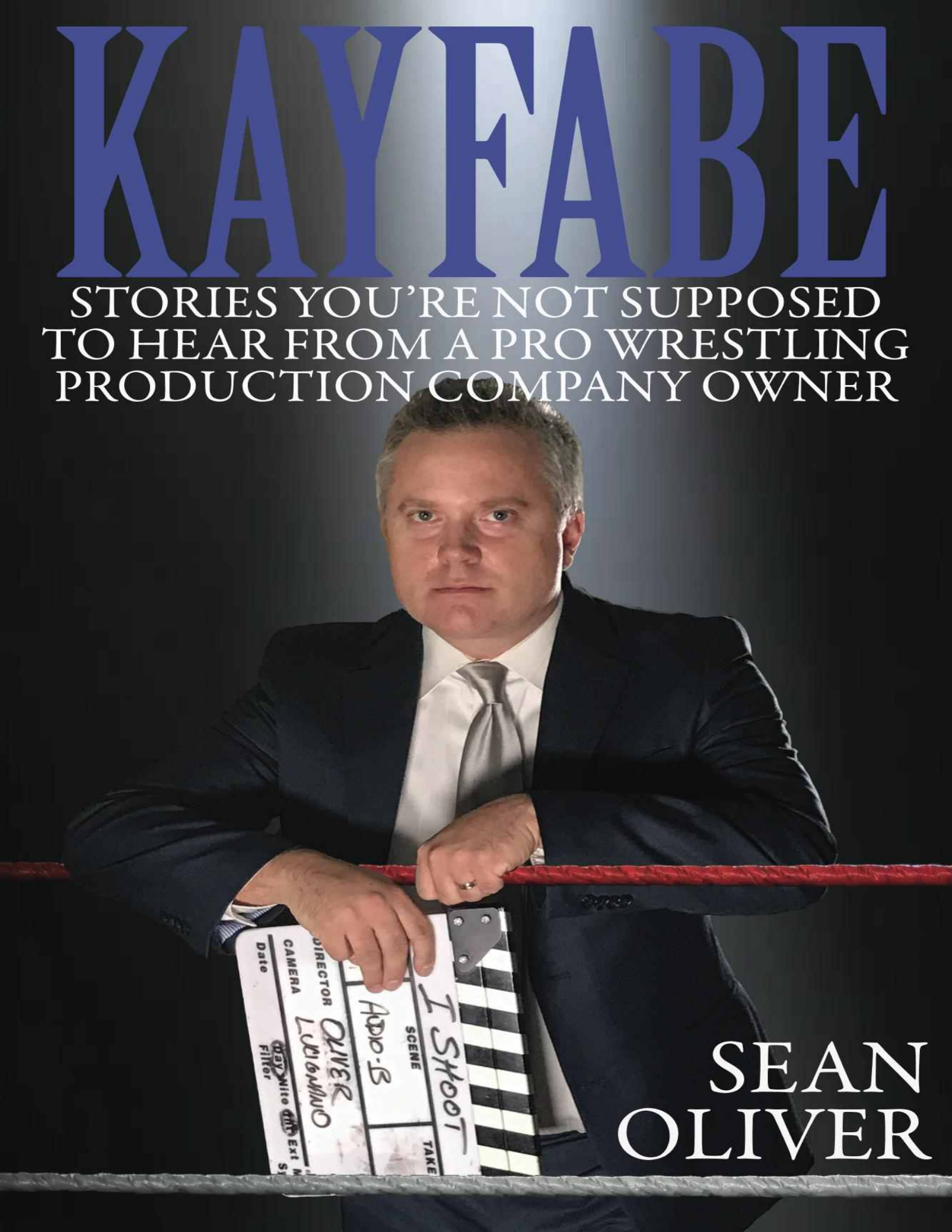
KAYFABE

STORIES YOU'RE NOT SUPPOSED TO HEAR FROM A PRO WRESTLING PRODUCTION COMPANY OWNER



SEAN OLIVER

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BY SEAN OLIVER

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For my family–Nicole, Mia, and Lana.
Forever on this journey with me.

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Foreword

It’s been said the true mark of a genius is how he is able to make others shine. It’s a well-known fact in show business that men like Bud Abbott, Oliver Hardy, Dan Rowan, and most significantly, Carl Reiner were the true comedic geniuses of Abbott and Costello, Laurel and Hardy, Rowan and Martin, and Reiner and Mel Brooks. Being the straight man is every bit as important if not more important than the guy getting the laughs. That’s Sean Oliver.

In this wonderfully written book, Sean takes the reader on an epic journey. The ride takes you through a veritable *who’s who* of the professional wrestling world–Bruno, Race, Nash, Hall, The Iron Sheik, Russo, Dixie Carter. The list is endless. The stories are phenomenal. It’s virtually impossible to not laugh out loud as he makes you feel you’re sitting in the room with him, Terry Funk, and Jim Cornette. Same thing goes for his telling of a New Jack or Sandman story. When he’s not making you laugh out loud, he’s making you cringe at other stories regarding workers like Bagwell and Beefcake. It’s an amazing journey with both hills and valleys.

As he tells one story after another, it becomes evident that, indeed, Sean has that amazing gift of the classic straight men mentioned earlier. I have no doubt that any true wrestling fan, be it old school or modern, will thoroughly enjoy taking this journey with him. Just don’t start reading until you have time to read the whole book because it’s darn near impossible to put down.

Tod Gordon

October 2017

Introduction

Buff Bagwell just told me he would punch my teeth down my throat when he sees me in New Jersey next month.

I'm standing on my porch looking down at the iPhone in my hand, the aforementioned caller now having hung up, leaving me speechless. I'd been in this business for seven years and more or less had the element of surprise eliminated from my dealings with talent and promoters. I now knew the chemical makeup of the species known as "wrestler," or better designated, "worker." Like a dedicated explorer filling his journal for the next National Geographic piece, I have watched from the bushes, learning the howls and sqwaks. I know what they mean. I can interpret their language, I can read between the lines. I know their behavior.

Having said that, I was surprised. Not because a worker was acting like an asshole. But moreso because it was Buff telling me this.

Six months prior to this phone call, Buff, real name Marcus, was to be a guest on our popular show *Timeline: The History of WCW,* covering the year 1997. Buff was entrusted to cover an entire year of this historical series, sitting beside me and poring over the intricate details of a year in the life of one of wrestling's biggest federations.

The recall required of a guest for a successful edition of this series is no small order. The series comes alive when a guest can seemingly take us back in time and regale us with anecdotes and recollections from the road, the arenas, the hotel rooms, and the TV tapings. Fans, as well as this host/producer/owner, thirst for the minutiae of wrestling days of old. The great guest can relay details of plans hatched by promoters and bookers, wrestling's decision makers. They can openly discuss scandal, arrests,

perhaps the occasional locker room brawl. They remember the greats, talents they worked with who made the sport magical. They remember the not so greats, often the more amusing discussions, who made for frustrating nights and impossible travels.

The key here is that they *remember,* that they recreate these moments for us.

We were set up for two back-to-back shoots in Queens, New York, right outside LaGuardia Airport. First up was an episode of our series *Breaking Kayfabe* with guest Lanny Poffo. We'd shoot for maybe two hours, from 7-9 p.m. When we parted with Lanny, we would do a full "turnaround," meaning the room would be reset. The *Breaking Kayfabe* set, its tables, chairs, and lighting setup would be redone to create the ambiance for the next show going before the cameras, which was Buff's edition of *Timeline: The History of WCW*. The turnaround would take about an hour. We would be ready to roll somewhere around 10 or 10:30 p.m.

The plan was to have Buff (nah, that night he was Marcus) picked up at his hotel down the road and brought to our set when we were ready. I'd spoken to him on the phone and texted him a few times since arriving in Queens. Smooth sailing. He was going to grab a bite and would be ready to roll with us in a few hours when we were done with Lanny's shoot. Cool.

Lanny Poffo's edition of *Breaking Kayfabe* goes perfectly. It was our first time working with him and by show's end we all know we have a winner in the can. Or, more properly, on the hard drive. Time for Marcus.

Except now we can't reach him. He's not responding to texts. The phone is going to voicemail. I knew the hotel he was at, so I knew where to send my crew. But I didn't know the room.

What I *did* know, was that there was a bunch of wrestlers in town for a convention that weekend. There were only a couple of hotels surrounding the airport that were being used for talent. It was Friday night and talent would be jettisoned in throughout the evening. More than likely they'd be eating and congregating in the hotel bar and grills. Marcus mentioned grabbing a bite, chances are he's in there. Two from our crew, Brian and Craig, jumped in the car and headed down the road.

In the room Anthony and I are more or less ready. I'm tinkering with lights in this difficult room. It's tight and ugly. There's a silent tension. I'm telling myself everything is fine. I had been texting and talking with him. He was excited, lucid, polite. Three hours ago.

I'm trading texts with Brian, *Is he outside?*

Nope.

Is anyone there that we know?

I don't see anyone. I'll go inside.

I hadn't worked with Marcus before so I didn't really know what to realistically expect. Should I have been concerned? What exactly is this disappearance all about? Is this just an inconvenience or a problem? Who knew?

In a stunning reversal of roles, Bran texts me that Jake Roberts, stone cold sober, is informing them that Bagwell is in the bar and not in good shape. Brian explains to Jake that Marcus is late for our shoot, so Jake offers to get involved and help get Marcus on track and out of the bar.

Jake "the Snake" Roberts was a very talented wrestler with a notoriously troubled past. His bouts with addiction are well documented. We would have our own uncomfortable moment with Jake about a year after this, but right now, with sobriety his co-pilot, Jake is helping us out.

Brian get Jake's number. Always business.

Radio silence prevails for a time as Anthony and I are left in the suite, which now feels like a cell. I'm concerned about what's going on and I'm starting to tinker. When I have too much time or something is not going well, I fuck with the setup. Maybe I can get a better angle on that accent light, more diffusion on the backlight.

Though the reports from the hotel down the road are troubling, we know better than to hit the panic button. Professional wrestlers of yesteryear are performers to the core. We had been in enough situations where, for whatever reason, the talent seemed like they might have a tough time delivering. We've hosted the tired, travel-weary, distrustful, and cocktailed. But when the proverbial red light goes on they snap into a zone. It's *that* drastic sometimes, that sudden and obvious. They flip an internal switch and become charming and interesting. Marcus might be one of those gifted with the performer's gene.

Anthony was keeping tabs on the situation down the street while I was wiring myself for sound. His phone rang. It was Brian.

"They have Buff," Anthony tells me.

"Give me the phone." I take it from him. "Brian, scale of 1 to 10, how bad is it?"

"Um, eleven."

Goddamn it.

Performer's gene. I'm hanging on to the hope that Marcus transforms when the cameras roll. Maybe he shakes off the couple of beers and delivers. There are 60 pages of meticulously researched script, costing Anthony about six weeks and a piece of his sanity for every *Timeline* we shoot. I have crew to pay, a slot filled with this show on our release schedule next quarter. This has to work.

They head out and Anthony and I head down to the lobby to meet them. The lobby of the LaGuardia Hotel is very big and the entrance from the parking garage is clear across the lobby from the elevators. As we emerged and headed toward the center of the lobby, the sight emerging from the parking ramp made my knees weak. There was Marcus being carried by both Craig and Brian. They stood on either side of him, each of his arms around their necks, with his feet dragging as he fumbled for footing. He couldn't walk, stumble, or sway on his own. Buff was still in tremendous shape at the time. The 6 foot, 238 pound chiseled, Greek-Godlike specimen was being dragged by my bearded, heavily tattooed crew. It looked like Spartacus owed money to the Sons of Anarchy.

When he looked up and saw me coming toward him, he kinda shoved off Craig and Brian, making a pathetic attempt to upright himself. He slurred some greeting and as we walked to the elevator I asked him to sit with me on a lobby couch for a second. I gave him the premise of the show, the format, and how we would shoot. Truthfully, I wanted an up-close assessment of just how impaired he would come across. He couldn't walk, but shit, we would be sitting. Could he talk?

"Dass cool, bruther," he slurred. "Iss gonna be great."

Nope. Couldn't talk.

"Marcus," I started as I leaned in, out of earshot from the other guys. "Do you wanna get some coffee or something first? We have all night."

"Nah brother, I'm cool. Less go do ziss." His speech and drool failed to assure me. What choice did I have? The walk to the elevator and then the room would be a good three or four minutes. Hey, maybe it would all wear off.

I walked ahead of everyone. I didn't want to see my guest being carried, or maybe I wanted him to retain his dignity and not have me see him being carried. I don't know how he made it to the room but he did. We wired him

for sound, turned on the lights and cameras, and I said a vague prayer to no particular deity. Now was the time to find out about that performance gene.

I launched into the intro, read the details about the date and events to be discussed first. “January 4th, Scott Hall and Jerry Saggs shoot on each other during a tag team match.” I serve up a question about that night in Shreveport, Louisiana, and Marcus returns the most unintelligible, ridiculous attempt at an answer. It very well may have been about the fight in Shreveport. It may have been a recipe for baklava.

I attempt a second question and before long it’s obvious this isn’t going to work. He’s rambling, slurring, drooling. I’m not paying attention. I’m trying to figure out how to shut this down. There was no way I could charge someone to watch this. This couldn’t go on.

I waved off Anthony behind the cameras. “I need a minute.” I turned to Marcus, quietly. “Hey man, this isn’t working. You’re not in the right shape for this. You probably can’t tell but believe me you don’t want this released.”

“No, no…I’m fine,” he said. “Just gimme fifteen minutes to kick out.”

The use of pro wrestling terms by wrestlers to describe real world situations is always something to behold. Despite the insanity of this tense situation, I was heartily amused by the use of “kick out.” That may be second only to The Iron Sheik referring to the man who murdered his daughter as a “jabroni” in a documentary.

Marcus sat in the guest seat and I headed into the other room, followed by Anthony.

“What do you want to do,” he asked. He is the co-owner of Kayfabe Commentaries with me and it was really as much his decision as mine. I wanted to make sure we were on the same page.

“Ant, we can’t put that shit out. If he can’t straighten out we have to shut it down.”

We went over scheduling options for the next day. It was impossible. It was now or never. I headed back out to see how Marcus’ kicking out was going.

We hoped for a miracle and started again. I delivered what must have been a half-hearted intro, read the Nash/Saggs brawl details, and turned to Marcus who gave an exact duplicate of the mess he served up the first time. Again, I got about two questions in and I told Marcus it was still pretty bad.

He didn’t think so. “Ahhh tha wuzzz good.” No, it wasn’t.

Marcus asks for more time. He reassures me he knows how to kick out of this. I know it's over, but for his benefit I allow him 15 minutes. This time he stands for the miraculous recovery and walks to the far wall. He leans against it, places his hands by his side, closes his eyes and leans his head back. I watch what appears to be a mystical, trancelike ceremony. He stood there quietly. We all waited in awkward silence.

There was simply no doubting science. The third restart went no better. I was now frustrated and wanted to get the hell out of there. It was a waste of money, time, and creative energy. And I'd have to be firm with Marcus, but also compassionate. I told him it was over.

"I want *Marcus*, not this guy," I told him. I put my hand on his shoulder. "Dude, you don't want your family to see this, your future employers. On my end, I can't ask someone to pay money to watch this."

With that, Marcus buried his head in his hands. He began to sob. "Please brother, can't we do this? I need the money."

He was crying real tears. I felt like shit. Of course I couldn't continue the shoot with him in that condition, and it was his fault for getting zonked. But still I felt like the Grim Reaper. I reached into my pocket.

"Here take this," I said as I pressed $200 into his hand. "It's a little something for trying. We will do this again. Promise."

"Thanks brother," he said through his tears. "I'm sorry."

I assured him it was no problem, signaled Brian to kill the lights. I headed off to change out of my suit and Brian and Craig stood Marcus up and guided him out. His fanny pack sounded like there were ten boxes of Tic Tacs in there. Lord knows what Marcus had in his system.

The day wasn't a total loss. The Lanny Poffo edition of *Breaking Kayfabe* was great. Still, I felt like shit. I was frustrated at not being able to nail the *Timeline*, and depressed about Bagwell. We headed back to Jersey.

The next day I was driving and my phone rang. It was Marcus. I couldn't imagine what was left to say. But I was curious.

"Hey Marcus," I answered.

"Hey brother. Just wanted to say sorry for last night, man. Thanks for being so cool with the cash and I just want you to promise me you won't give up on me for that show and you bring me back out for it sometime."

"Marcus," I said, "consider that money a deposit. I promise we will fly you back up and get that show. You have my word. I won't forget about you."

He thanked me again and made me promise to hook up again. I wasn't bullshitting him. I wanted that show. The damn thing was written already and I felt Marcus was sincere and repentant. I believe in second chances and would give him the payday. I planned on bringing him in the following summer for a convention appearance and to nail the *Timeline.*

A few months later in May I called Bagwell. I was actually a little disappointed that I hadn't lined up the shoot sooner, but I was happy to make good. I knew Marcus would appreciate it. I called him and explained that I wanted to rebook him finally, get the show, thus making good on my "deposit." I saw he was booked on a convention out here in Jersey anyway.

I was positively cheery in my Jesus role, offering a second chance to one who had fallen. Redemption.

And he was positively a douche bag.

"Ah, sorry brother I got a film crew coming out here shooting a deal with me and my family. The payday is a lot bigger than yours, so I'm gonna pass, brother."

A fury rose in me. The echoes of every story I'd heard about promoters viewing talent as opportunist leeches began to ring in my mind. It was exactly this behavior that cast workers in such an unfavorable light. For the most part I'd had great rapport with talent. I was wronged by this cat. I was in the red on that show, and still I gave money to someone in need.

Had he forgotten? The crying? My generosity? The fucking guy would be here anyway! It wasn't like he had to choose between either keeping the obligation to us or to the new, riveting documentary being produced about the family Buff. This would have been in his spare time during Legends of the Ring convention weekend.

But no. This was a "fuck you" to my crew and our time spent jacking off in Queens while waiting for him to kick-out of his drool fest. It was a fuck you to the $200 I gave him to help out, after being given no product but still paying all the expenses associated with the shoot, plus Buff's travel and accommodations. I don't need to be martyred for my holy deeds, I truthfully felt it in my gut watching him break down.

Perhaps that was the purpose after all. Maybe it was a personal journey, type of thing. I was tested and I was generous, magnanimous. And now this was the final part of my test. I would now be Christ-like and turn the other cheek.

Fuck that. I went off.

“Marcus, maybe you forgot who I am but I’m the guy that put $200 in your fucking hand after you mumbled and drooled into our fucking microphones when you were supposed to do an interview for us!”

He hesitated not a moment in returning fire.

“You yelling at me?! I’ll tell you what…when I see you in New Jersey next month I’ll punch your fucking teeth down your throat and you can film *that!”* And with that, the call was terminated.

I stood in amazement. I was so pissed. Getting as angry as I do when insulted isn’t the best quality for business. All that Jesus shit I was talking about before would be a welcome quality. It ain’t in me. So immediately I remind myself that the whole Buff Bagwell ordeal is on video. We never cut the camera. We actually make it a policy never to cut the cameras, so we have it all on the hard drive–the good, the bad, and the ugly. The whole incident was recorded and Marcus signed the release. Fair game.

Launching into vengeance-is-mine mode, my initial instinct is to pull the raw footage and run it for free on our site, YouTube, TMZ, and anywhere that would air it. It’s a damning half hour or so of video, complete with crying, “kicking out,” and a language unlike English, spoken by Buff in his attempts to answer my questions.

Ultimately, that would have been a bad decision. Success in this business is built on trust. And even though Marcus…well now he’s become Buff… was totally in the wrong, it still would have violated an implicit trust to air that video of his worst moments on earth. You just don’t do that.

Right after hanging up, I took a moment to ask myself just what the hell I was doing. You become desensitized to the abnormal events in this business and you come to just accept them.

This book is as complete a collection as I could muster, of such stories. The backdrop of those stories is the building and growing of this outlaw production company, and our learning to navigate the bizarre and rocky waters in the frontierland of the independent wrestling world.

Buckle up.

1. Garage Days

I had just committed to booking Greg “The Hammer” Valentine and The Honky Tonk Man to record audio tracks for a company that didn’t yet exist. Back in January of 2007, I was the co-owner of nothing, with zero credibility and no track record at all in wrestling. No one knew me. No one should have trusted me. Wrestling was a business with close connections and a lot of regular players. I was unknown, but I’d just gotten a number of someone who purported to book pro wrestlers.

An hour or so before this, on a fateful, wintery night on the 45th floor of 60 Wall Street in New York City, I was at work and on the phone with my friend Anthony. It was an uninspiring night at work and Anthony was equally bored and we were bullshitting about whatever. It must’ve been wrestling related. Then he said it.

“You know the only thing that hasn’t been tried in wrestling?” he asked.

“Viagra on a pole match? Oh wait…”

“Alternate commentary tracks for wrestling matches,” he said. “Just like a director’s commentary on a movie DVD, except it’s the wrestlers doing a shoot while you watch the actual match.”

That was it. That’s the simple genesis of this multi-headed monster we ride today. It was a long road to what we know today, though. The initial idea was exciting and there was really no reason why we couldn’t do it. We’d pay the wrestlers to come in, put on a headset and microphone, and

watch the match in real time while we recorded their commentary. I would sit beside them on mic to move things along and make sure we got good content.

Right there was another birth, of sorts.

“Dude,” I said, “if you’re serious I will get on the phone and see who we could get.” Anthony was confident we could cobble together equipment to do good recordings and we could pull video. I’m not even sure if we had a plan on bringing the content to mass market, like who would vend the files and manage the sales. I guess we figured it would all be easy enough because that night I went on the Internet to look at booking agents who were offering talent. At the same time I was also checking out Georgiann Makropolous’ website Wrestlingfigs.com. They always had comprehensive lists of wrestlers making personal appearances. I wanted to see who was going to be in New Jersey soon. I would correlate a wrestler’s appearance in our area with an agent that listed them for appearances. I found a guy named John Mills who was representing Greg Valentine and I also saw on Wrestlingfigs that Greg would be out here in a few weeks. I got this Mills guy on the phone that night.

I walked down the hallway to a conference room and closed the door while the machine of high finance whirled in the outer cubicles around me. As one of the world’s richest investment banks was putting together multi-million dollar deals, I was calling John Mills of Indiana to book Greg “The Hammer” Valentine to record alternate audio tracks to his wrestling matches. I’m not kidding when I tell you that I felt what I was doing was far more important. But you should have heard me explain our new concept to Mills, who may as well have been standing on a rickety porch in overalls chewing on a weed.

“Well, John,” I fumbled, “it’s like alternate commentary tracks for wrestling matches, just like when you watch a DVD and you get a director’s commentary. Except in this case we would be watching a match, say from YouTube or something, and I would be on headset with Greg. We would record him talking through the match, you know, screen specific.”

A pause. Then the weed gets rolled to other side of the mouth.

“Huh. It’s like a YouTube, ya said?” was John’s interpretation.

“Um no. We aren’t making a YouTube.”

“So it’s a YouTube thing?” he continues. “You gonna make a YouTube video, ya say now? I know whatcha doin’...you’re doin’ a YouTube.”

“No, it’s more like a shoot interview.”

“Ohhhhh now I get it. Y’all wanna do a shoot interview.” John was totally thrilled that he’d finally gotten the concept, as I’m sure I was hurting his head. Except he didn’t get the concept at all. But that’s okay. I’d explain it to Greg myself.

John said he would have Greg call me and we could work it out. Then I’d get back in touch with John for the details. I spoke with Greg Valentine that night. Two hours ago Greg Valentine was only someone I hoped would beat the shit out of Bob Backlund in 1982 in Madison Square Garden. Now I was hiring him for a company that didn’t exist. Without a real plan.

Greg seemed fine with it when we spoke. Greg seems fine with everything. He’s an easy-going guy. I probably could have told him we were going to sacrifice a virgin and drink the blood out of a dead goat’s asshole and his only question would have been where we were picking him up.

Greg was going to be wrestling in New Jersey on the appointed night, so we agreed to do this late at night when he returned to the hotel. Greg wanted to cut his own deal, and I hadn’t necessarily gone through proper channels to line this up, since I was piggybacking another promoter’s deal. Someone was bringing Greg out to New Jersey and footing the bill for his flight, hotel, food, and transportation. We would be sneaking in and getting product with only a payment to Greg. In turn, Greg also wouldn’t need to give a cut to anyone. We planned to set up down the hall from Greg and he’d head down after being dropped off after the matches that night.

John Mills called me back after feeding his chickens and told me that The Honky Tonk Man was also going to be working on the same card in New Jersey, also being brought in by Eric Simms, the self proclaimed Super Agent to yesterday’s stars of wrestling. Both Greg and Honky were booked by Eric for this run. John wanted to know if we wanted Honky as well for our autograph signing.

“John,” I corrected, “it’s the audio tracks remember?”

“What’s that now? It’s at an auto track? Like races, right?”

“Shoot interview, I mean. Shoot interview.”

“Ohhhh yeah, I remember what you’re doing. Why you confusin’ me?”

I called Anthony and we accepted the offer of The Honky Tonk Man joining Greg in recording some commentary tracks. We’d be able to grab two wrestlers’ sets of tracks and Honky was a shoot interview classic. He

was outspoken and people loved to hear him shoot. He agreed to creep down the hall and stay hush-hush about the additional, unsanctioned gig at the hotel. I also asked both guys for their beverage of choice. Talent needs to be comfortable and content to perform. Greg was easy–merlot. Honky wanted Seagram's Extra Smooth Vodka. He was very specific so it must've been important. Some extra smooth shit.

The plan was set. Anthony and I were confident that my sitting with each guy as his match played would yield great content. A ton of stuff could be covered in just one match. We could talk about the opponent, the arena, the city, the finish, and the card that the match was on. The conversation would outlast the matches probably.

I got a call from Mills again. His electricity was still on I guess. He said word was out on us and our plan to undercut the promoters and Eric Simms. We were being referred to as "the hotel guys," he said. Brilliant moniker. We needed to think of a way to still get this done and not get blocked.

I called Greg Valentine and explained this possible issue. I framed it as our desire to pay them fully and not have to give anything to the agents or promoters. We agreed that Greg would tell Eric that he knew my father, a sportswriter, from years ago when he worked for the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*. Greg would say he was doing this little thing as a favor, off the record kind of thing. He asked Honky to come too.

My father hadn't been to Seattle, never written for a paper, and hated wrestling. So much so he even died on the day of a card I had tickets to at The Meadowlands, preventing me from going. Of course, no one would have to know that.

All of this was very unethical and really not the way to do business. But we really needed to kick the door open to this world. Once inside we could wheel and deal as a known entity. But we needed product and somewhat cheaply. There was no existing market for this product, we didn't know how to even predict what we could make. Today we don't fuck over agents and promoters, unless they fuck us first. Then I relish revenge. You'll get all that stuff as you read on.

So the plan was set for a Saturday night in late January 2007 at the lovely Howard Johnson's at Newark Airport. Mice won't even go in that fucking place, but for Super Agent Eric Simms, that $69 per room was just too good to pass up for his talent! We pulled up and Simms was checking in both Honky and Greg at the front desk. I headed over and Anthony and I

introduced ourselves to them both, ignoring Eric completely. I explained the entire concept to the wrestlers and told them we would meet them in our room after the show. Greg said he'd call me. All the while Eric is standing there looking over like the kid in the cafeteria who can't sit at the cool table. He was probably pissed that we hijacked the talent, but we'd be working with them after the show. They could either be in their rooms pounding off, or make a few hundred bucks.

Truthfully we should have included Eric and probably contacted him beforehand. We simply didn't really know any better, or maybe we did and we just didn't care and we were making a point. If you get bulldozed or pushed around by people in your first day on the frontier, that's the identity you'll be carrying around forever. But if you kick open the door to the saloon, stride to the bar and slam your whisky down hard, people will treat you as an independent and come over to you. This wasn't a big business plan. We didn't even have one. It was just instinct as this booking began to feel like others were being territorial about the thing. My take was that territories died a long time ago. I'm going right to the talent to get started, cutting our own deal. The others can fight with each other. We answer to no one but the talent, and sometimes not even.

Eric Simms, sensing an outsider sneaking into the business, showed up at the hotel room with the talent that night, and stayed around for all the recording sessions. And the free pizza and wings, of course. We let him sit in on the sessions because we wanted to now make an impression. When he saw how well we took care of the talent, how comfortable everything was, he asked me to come outside and take a walk with him during a break in recording. He loved what we were doing, all tension and skepticism was gone, and he wanted to book talent for us. It was a nice conversation and Eric has been working with us ever since that night. The greatest accomplishment in all of this though, was acquiring Honky Tonk Man's discontinued vodka for his Gatorade mixer.

From the get-go, I knew that amenities had to be as important as the project. All of these things speak to the professionalism and seriousness of a company. I had been working in the entertainment business for years prior to this and I knew that happy talent = good performances.

But Honky wanted this Seagram's Extra Smooth and I couldn't find it for shit. I hit like five liquor stores in town. Fortunately Bayonne is apparently loaded with alcoholics and degenerates and there are like twenty liquor

stores. At last, after a couple of hours, I walked into a liquor store downtown and tucked way in the back in the vodka section, behind all the bottles, against the fucking back wall of the shelf stood a dusty bottle of Seagram's Extra Smooth Vodka. I grabbed it and felt both like a hero and a skank and headed out on the road, ready to gas up a client with booze.

After they returned they had some wings and pizza that we ordered for them. Honky made his classic Gatorade and vodka mixer, while Greg headed for his bottle of merlot. I brought a corkscrew from home that he was smitten with. He walked over to the dresser and began to admire it while he opened the wine.

"Who's corkscrew is this?" he asked.

"Mine," I replied.

"This is a really nice one."

I don't know what made it so special but he was taken by it. Greg was standing on the other side of the room, babbling to himself, putting over my corkscrew as he used it.

"This might be the nicest one I've ever seen," he mumbles to himself. For what it was worth, we hadn't recorded one word, but I knew we would at least be enshrined in the wrestling industry as the company with the nicest corkscrew.

We went on to record the tracks with both men separately, and then one track which covered a match where they tagged together as Rhythm and Blues. The recordings worked. We saw that this was a viable concept and more than that, I saw that I could get these guys to respond, to open up. I'd never done this before and there's no practice or schooling to make someone a good interviewer.

We banged out about 10 tracks between the two wrestlers by the end of the long night. We left with a unique product that we were soon marketing as downloadable mp3s. We began to get some industry attention with this unique form of wrestling media. Soon after going live with the tracks, I remember Anthony emailing me excitedly that we'd made $50 the first month. I guess it was an accomplishment that people were taking to the concept but the amount we were hustling to move these tracks wasn't consistent with that return. I knew we needed more talent to add to our repertoire.

Eric Simms called us with our next opportunity and I was glad I took that walk with him. Eric asked us if we had any interest in having 8-time NWA

World Champion Harley Race record tracks for us. We jumped at the chance to have him on our new product. We booked him and set up in a room at the Holiday Inn, just down the road from the Ho Jo. We had never met Harley, so we went to dinner with him and his wonderful, late wife B.J. I sat next to Harley and we talked wrestling, sports, etc. He was cordial, but pretty guarded and reserved. After all, the whole premise of what we were trying to do with the commentaries really shit all over kayfabe. I think maybe he was hesitant.

During dinner, Harley says "so your company is called Kayfabe Commentaries, huh?"

"Yes," I said. Without warning Harley then began speaking in carny to me.

"Yizu spizeak kizarney?" he said. For a second I was thrown, but he's sitting there staring at me, B.J. is looking on, barely concealing a smile. This was a little test, so I responded in kind. I told him, in carny, that I am really bad at it, unless I go slowly. I'm not one of the boys.

He laughed, corrected one of my mispronounced carny words, and went back to eating. But from that point on, he answered anything I asked him, before, during, and after the session. We headed to the hotel room and sat down in front of the TV to record the tracks. The Bud Lights and Marlboros kept Harley going through the matches.

Harley is remarkable and an iconic figure in the history of the NWA title. For the serious wrestling fan who considered this a sport and a no-nonsense one at that, Harley Race was a deity. And this wrestling god did two things with his hands that night that left me at a loss for words.

At one point between tracks, Harley, sitting beside me on the couch, leans over and says "Hey, can you do this?" I inform him when that leads the conversation the answer is generally, "no." He was holding a bottle cap from his beer, which he put between his pinky and ring finger, and in seconds he folded it in half. I know people can bend shit like rods and irons, but Harley did that with the two weakest fingers on the hand. He folded the friggin' thing into a clamshell. I put it between my fingers in a ridiculous attempt at folding it. I knew I couldn't but I wanted to feel *how* difficult it was. It's impossible, but Harley did it. I saw it.

I did mention two feats Harley performed with his powerful hands. We were expecting a blizzard in New Jersey that night, and Harley and BJ had to fly out early the next morning to get to an event in Kansas City.

Throughout the recording session he was getting increasingly nervous as the snow lightly began to come down, and then picked up as we got later into the night. He was sitting beside me as I stood to look out the window and assess the accumulation.

"If we're snowed-in here in New Jersey for the weekend this'll cost you more money," Harley said. Then he reaches between my legs from behind, and pinches my balls as I'm standing there looking out toward the window. I swear I didn't know what to say, and saying it in carny wouldn't have helped. Harley is cackling away, sipping his beer, and I'm standing there frozen in time. Don't pretend *you* haven't found yourself snowbound in a Holiday Inn at Newark Airport, after having had your testicles violated by an eight-time NWA world champion.

Seriously, what the fuck? Was this an old-school rib? Is it a form of the secret wrestler's handshake? This was *Harley friggin' Race!* Let me rephrase that...this was Harley friggin' Race *pinching my balls.* Thank God he didn't do the bottlecap trick with them.

Some weeks later we went on to record more mp3 tracks with The Iron Sheik. He was beginning to garner a crazy reputation from his appearances on *The Howard Stern Show* but we found him to be quite sedate and extremely polite. About the most notable thing about Sheiky that night was the co-dependent relationship between him and his agent Eric Simms. Sheik couldn't even order dinner without looking to Eric to make the decisions for him. From the beverage, to the soup, to the entree, Sheik would just shrug and look over at Eric who would act like the parent trying to ascertain what their 3-year-old wants at Applebee's.

That particular pre-tape dinner saw us join an eclectic mix of personalities: Sheiky baby–subdued and quiet; Eric Simms–boisterous and annoying complete with Steve Austin theme song as his ringtone which was at the loudest possible setting and went off for the entire dinner; Sean McCaffrey, owner of WSU women's wrestling federation, and female wrestling legend Luna Vachon. All in all, the meal at the restaurant was very normal. For pro wrestling, anyway.

McCaffrey was there to tape a shoot interview with Luna for his WSU deal, so they were the first to leave the table and head back up to Luna's room. Luna was so soft-spoken and sweet, so quiet. Maybe a little out-of-it, to be honest. When we were back at the room and recording the Sheik's tracks we get word that Luna was getting violently ill. McCaffrey was

dispatched by Luna to our room. He told Eric about the situation and asked if Sheik had anything that could help out Luna, who was in a bad way. Eric turned to Sheik.

“Luna isn’t feeling good,” he started. “You got anything to help her out?”

“Eric, baba,” Sheiky started, “now I am doctor?” Wrestlers and their pills do not part so easily. McCaffrey headed out empty handed and ended up doing the interview with her sick in bed. I think they tried to market it as a sexy, bedroom interview. But the truth is, her head was in the bowl all night at the Ho-Jo in Newark. The vicious, scary, mohawked, chick-heel Luna Vachon, who turned out to be sweet as pie in person, would be found dead of an overdose three years later. This was my one and only interaction with her.

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The final commentary tracks that we ever recorded were with Paul Orndorff and were never released until we put out an 8-hour box set of all of them. About 90% of that session was tension for me. This was an Eric Simms booking so he arrived with Paul after an appearance. It was clear that Paul didn’t want to do this. He was in such a shitty mood I don’t think he even wanted to be alive. You know, standard Orndorff state of being.

We greet Eric and Paul in the lobby and we step into the elevator. Orndorff announces, with great exasperation, he is tired, he’ll give us a half hour of his time, or an hour tops. That’s it. He’s abrupt and very curt. The contract which was agreed to stated that he was do three hours worth of recording. Eric, the booking agent on the deal who is well aware of this, says nothing. My hero.

I was very annoyed. If I took an acting gig and got to the set and mouthed off that I wouldn’t be doing more than an hour’s work that day, my agent or manager would have been called immediately and they would have corrected me. But Eric stood there holding Paul’s bag.

“Paul,” I said, “we’re going to do everything to make you comfortable, and you tell me when you start to get uncomfortable, ok? We’ll go little by little.” I know everyone thinks my interviews are my greatest contribution to the company. But I think it’s this stuff, keeping the train on the tracks.

Paul and I started rolling on the commentaries. Eric took off to deal with some other business. After an hour or so of recording and a couple of

glasses of red wine, Paul addresses me, Anthony, and Craig, our newest addition to the band.

"Are you guys with *him?"* he asks, gesturing to the hotel room door that shuttered us from Eric Simms and hour or so ago.

"No!" we all announce at the same time.

Turns out Paul was angry at Eric all day, not us. This accounted for his attitude upon meeting us. He thought we worked together in some way. There was a screwy money deal earlier that day with Eric and one of the Steiner brothers. Steiner was supposed to be working with Orndorff, but he claimed Eric did something wrong so he flew home! He told Orndorff and so now Paul is fuming and suspicious of us. Once we told him we weren't with Eric, he relaxed, had more wine, and we did two more hours of recording.

We had good content on all those mp3 tracks. We'd begun learning some lessons on dealing with talent as well. If you listen to those tracks now, you can hear the echoes of what would come later when we began producing the shoot videos. When we began preparing the box set and I listened back to those for the first time in years, I could hear myself feeling my way through these interviews. I was subconsciously finding the ways to get the participants in the most guarded business in the world to open up to a complete stranger. I was asking the questions that *I* wanted answers to, as a fan. That would come to be the cornerstone of Kayfabe Commentaries and the biggest reason why our fans are so dedicated to us. We simply ask what they want to know.

The only problem with everything up to this point is that we could never survive as a company serving such a small niche, the Internet shoot fan, at such a small price point. These downloadable mp3s were selling at a few bucks each. The expenses of running a business with even mild overhead would be nearly impossible to run with a micro-niche customer base purchasing such cheap product. I had my eye on something larger and I thought we had a shot at doing something special.

I approached Anthony about making the move to video. We simply had to.

2. Send in the Bookers

Our decision to go to video was a fiscal decision but also an opportunity to conquer a market I saw ripe for the taking. The shoot interview, that is, wrestlers on-camera openly discussing the once hidden illusion of pro wrestling and revealing its details, had not changed much since its inception in 1995. It had been twelve years and producers in this field were still making little to no effort to shoot these long-form interviews professionally–with lighting and quality sound. It resembled more of an interrogation, with a single crude, static close up, random ambient lighting, no microphone, and a disembodied voice reading a list of prepared questions with little to no actual discussion.

We get a great deal of credit for having revolutionized the shoot-style programming industry. Though well deserved, the truth is it wasn't much of a challenge. My background in the entertainment industry and oft-mentioned media degree would not have allowed my sensibilities to produce programming any other way. Mic'ing, lighting, and shooting is the life's breath of recorded media. Without great care it will look and sound like a mess. At that point the content is almost secondary.

I felt very strongly that if we were going to enter the shoot market we also needed strong concepts to be part of the differentiating factor we offered viewers. The shoot interview was stale but with some tweaking, the concept could be reimagined. I had this little idea floating around in my

head about rewriting wrestling history, and doing it on-camera. To do this, we would use the creative juices of the great wrestling minds, the bookers. The wrestling booker is the man that decides who's winning, why they are winning, who is hitting them in the head with a chair on TV next week after they won, and how it's all going to wrap up next month in "an arena near *YOU!"* They truly make or break a wrestling promotion. And I wanted inside their heads.

There were two bookers I wanted right away. Dusty Rhodes was a long-time, electric babyface on TV but also one of wrestling's most successful bookers. Better still, he was engaging. We're planning to have these people talk to you for two or three hours on your TV. I don't care how brilliant they may be, it helps if they are also entertaining, charming, well-spoken, and a host of other X factors that just make you willing to watch someone. It ain't a checklist, but I know it when I see it.

The other name I always wanted to see more of in these types of shows was Kevin Sullivan. I thought Kevin was so underrated as a wrestling booker. Fans gave Sullivan a lot of crap for a WCW product that he was booking which looked, at times, very goofy. People forgot the totality of what Kevin did as a booker *before* the influences of multi-million dollar wrestling stars had a tug-of-war for creative control with bookers. Kevin got ensnared by that a little in WCW.

Sullivan knew how to take a threatening heel and make them a monster. He was so brilliant at building heat (anger) from fans toward the heel, week-by-week, show-by-show. He knew how to make a guy scary, and was a scary character on-camera himself.

I called my new friend Eric Simms and told the Super Agent that we wanted to throw our hats in the shoot game. I told him I wanted either Dusty or Sullivan to book our first show, originally titled *And the Year Was...with Guest Booker (insert name)*. The premise was to have either Dusty or Sullivan book the WWE's watershed year of 1984 if Hulk Hogan had not come to the company. Could they still have made it a breakout year, given the tools of cable TV and a ton of national exposure? Simms said he'd reach out.

So after he probably called all the other shoot companies and blabbed about our plans to enter their market, he reached out for talent. From a scheduling standpoint, Sullivan would be a possibility and we could have him real soon. He made the deal for us through Sullivan's contact James

Soubasis of 3 Count Promotions. James handled all of Kevin's business arrangements and would soon become like a member of Kayfabe Commentaries' extended family himself. But at this point he was delivering us Kevin Sullivan. I spoke to James on the phone and gave him the pitch. James was in the middle of producing his own documentary with Kevin, so I think he appreciated the effort we were putting forth and the additional exposure for Sullivan.

We had a concept. We had the talent booked. Now we just needed everything else.

Our early set up was a single camera, shot to DV tape, a shotgun microphone, split between the guest and myself, and a tungsten light kit. We shot this way for a while. It was certainly an "opening band" set up, but we could still play on big stages this way. And, Christ, it was light years beyond the production that other shoot companies put forth.

Man, I just did what I hate. At times people have said that kind of stuff to me. "Well, at least this is better than X company does." That drove me nuts. The standard against which we should measure is well beyond the lowest common denominator, which is what I felt the playing field was at that time. "They use no external mic *at all*, so if this is a little echoey it's better than them at least." Fuck no. That's such a loser attitude. If a fan paid $20 for this interview it would deliver on *all fronts*, and if I could have the disc go outside and wash their car for them too, I would. I take a fan's commitment to spend money on us very, very seriously.

That attitude helped me make another decision rather easily–to put myself on-camera as host. The easiest way for me to keep control of the pacing of the show and to ensure the high concept was executed effectively was for me to be right there leading the way on-camera. There would be less variables if the talent went where I led.

And I wore a suit. Suits signify something important is at hand. In this day of business casual ruling the dress codes in most offices, it is lost on most in this generation that respect is shown through dress. You may be some code monkey working in Silicon Valley wearing your jeans to work every day, but when grandma passes away you're going to her funeral wearing a suit. Why? Because she is worth it.

Our viewers are also worth it. One of our programs should feel like an occasion. It should feel that way for the talent as well. This was a no brainer.

We crafted the show to be a rebooking exercise for Sullivan. We gave him the roster, asked him to make cuts, additions, and book the WWE in 1984. About halfway through the shoot during a break, Kevin said, “I just want you guys to know I feel real comfortable with you. I’m enjoying this.”

Well why wouldn’t he, I thought. I shrugged and said, “Okay, that’s good.” Sullivan headed to the restroom during the break.

James laughed from across the room. “You guys don’t understand,” he started. “Kevin doesn’t like *anybody.* He usually gives me ‘the look’ when we are doing an appearance or a show.”

“What’s ‘the look’?” I asked.

“Get me the fuck out of here,” James laughed. “But he actually looked over and nodded, like things were going well.”

We finished the shoot and we were satisfied that we had a very different show under our belts. We thought this would get the industry’s attention and get us some traction. We didn’t know we had a series, or the first of several series. We were just focused on getting this out.

It wasn’t without its problems. Firstly, we realized that our rebooking concept was too open-ended. Sullivan could (and did) seemingly add every marquis name in the world to the roster. A company wouldn’t have unlimited resources to do this. We should have restricted the adding of names to some grading system or something. Also, the *entire* show was a booking session, like some Dungeons and Dragons fantasy game. We needed more discussion and a focused discussion of the theme at hand. We would seek to correct this in future editions.

It wouldn’t take us long to approach Gabe Sapolsky as our second booker in the series, now titled *Guest Booker.* Gabe was booking for Ring of Honor at the time and they had a very loyal fan base, very in-tune to the Internet wrestling world. They would be accessible to us and we figured we could establish early on that we would transcend the different eras in wrestling by using the young, contemporary Sapolsky soon after our Sullivan 1984 edition was released. Gabe accepted our offer and rebooked the WWE’s version of ECW, since Gabe worked at ECW at one time. The show was great. Gabe was so prepared and backed up all of his decisions with sound reasoning.

Around this time we saw this could be a viable ongoing series. Every few months we could do a new *Guest Booker* using someone different rebooking a new scenario. I was a huge fan of JJ Dillon’s book *Wrestlers*

Are Like Seagulls and in it he depicts the laborious task of writing TV with Vince McMahon for the WWE. I thought it would be great to get him on the show to detail that process, and of course, do it with us. There was our third *Guest Booker* subtitled *Writing Wrestling Television*. This was a great balance of discussion and booking. We found the formula. It worked.

One thing that *didn't* work that day was my voice. I'd lost it completely and was practically gargling hot tea and lemon all morning just to be able to get something to come out. I have that performer's gene so I wasn't too worried. I was confident that my body would correct as much as possible to get a show. It was amusing to Craig and Anthony though, as I'm preparing up to literally speak for three hours and every time I address them little more than a squeak comes out of my mouth. We got through it, but I do sound a little froggy in that show.

Everyone has always said Raven had a great mind for booking wrestling. He was a popular shoot interview guest and big part of the original ECW, wrestling's legendary and groundbreaking promotion of the 90s. However Raven was never an official booker for a federation. The premise of *Guest Booker* was always to have actual bookers on the show, but it was worth breaking the format to get Raven on the show. We would do an ECW-centric theme for the show and turn him loose.

I called him and pitched the concept. He immediately told me he didn't want to know anything more. He insisted that he come on cold and make his decisions spur of the moment. Raven is one of those guys that have an X factor that makes him very entertaining. He's also very smart, and he'll let you know that.

One thing about Raven, real name Scotty, is that he rubs the world the wrong way. The story of his *Guest Booker* shoot is an exhibition of the difficulty of working with Scotty. I will preface this by saying that I came to like and understand Scotty years later, to the point that we actually hired him to host his own series for our company. But back in 2008 we were working together for the first time. And it made me dread a second time.

In our initial phone conversation we covered the standard issues to discuss with wrestling talent–schedule, travel, and money. We worked through all three, though he balked a bit on the money. My negotiations are rather straight-forward so he eventually accepted the offer but let me know what a huge sacrifice this was, working for such a pittance. Whatever. I thought getting four-figures to talk for a while was fair.

We were set up to shoot and met Scotty in the lobby of the hotel when he arrived. He indicated he was hungry, which is always the case with him, so we headed into the hotel restaurant. We sat and tried to make small talk with Raven, though he wasn't very forthcoming with conversation. But he did see an electronic device that allowed him to join a trivia game on the TV above us and throughout the restaurant.

Scotty is pretty insecure and a large part of his defenses are a narcissism that emerges shortly after meeting him. Until he knows you and likes you, his narcissism centers around spending an inordinate amount of time showing you how smart he is. It was no surprise he'd flex a little trivia as we sat at the table with him. I'd prefer honest chatter about talent's kids, or football, or whatever common ground I have with a star. But we sat trying to get something going. He had ordered a nice, fat prime rib, so at least he'd be happy when that came. He played his game, was smart, and soon well fed with quality steak. Fine. Just give me a show that sells a ton.

We head to the set and get ready to roll. Just before shooting I gave Scotty the release form that all talent have to sign for us. It's pretty standard, most don't read it. They just sign it even though I tell everyone to read it.

Well Scotty read. And read. And began to suggest corrections to the agreement. It would bore you if I reproduced our release here, but trust me it just allows us to shoot you, sell you, and own the video. It's not a piece of major congressional legislation. But he asked to cross something out and make a correction. Go ahead. You're smart.

As he's signing the release, he really turns on the charm and says, "You have a deep voice on the phone and speak well, but if I knew you looked like this, I would have held out for more money." Mental note made–never negotiate in person. I shall always do it on the phone with a deep and authoritative voice. In desperate times where I must be in the same room with talent, I shall shroud myself with a large cloth.

In addition to handling talent's needs, negotiation, travel snafus, and the like, let it be known that I also have one additional, slightly important role to fill on the set…I'm the goddamn host of the show. When you are mind-fucked by a bunch of bullshit just before cameras roll, it's not easy to stay focused, amiable for the viewer, and polite and jovial to the guest. Directing the show and hosting the show are definitely two separate hats and separate parts of the brain. It's a juggling act to start with and disruptive talent make

for a lot of balls in the air. You want to say, “fuck this asshole” and just take a walk for a while. But you can’t because you have to talk to them and make them feel wonderful, chatty, and safe on-camera for three hours.

For all the tests to my patience at this point, he certainly delivered with the show. He did come in cold and he booked for over an hour, non-stop stream of consciousness. Halfway through the taping though, he begins to feign weakness and loss of his train of thought. He remarks more than once on-camera that he can’t think because we are starving him. The cocksucker just had a prime rib on our tab!

It’s fine though, the show is going well. My eye is on the prize. This will be easy to market and it will sell gangbusters. I’m just the whore laying in bed letting the trick ramble on and get a little rough because my eye is on the clock and the fucking money is on the dresser. Keep pumpin’, kid.

We finally wrap. Scotty is near death from malnutrition, of course, so I dispatch Craig to get him something from the restaurant. Naturally Scotty is very specific, needing apple pie a la mode and nothing else, exactly like the starving African children seen on late night Unicef commercials. Of course the restaurant doesn’t have that, so he goes over the dessert options with Craig on the phone. I don’t remember exactly what he ends up getting, but he sits alone on the set devouring it. Anthony tapes it and we end up running the closing credits over it.

Scotty is brought back from death’s twilight by the snack and the insanity continues. We’d recently launched a new series called *YouShoot,* which I will cover at length in the next chapter. The guests of that series are asked questions by fans, either via video or email. We often will ask talent with whom we work to record a question for an upcoming edition of *YouShoot.* Depending on the guest, we can sometimes get some great inside jokes that the *YouShoot* guest can expand on. So we ask Scotty to record a question for Sandman, a fellow ECW worker, with whom we’d be doing a *YouShoot* in a few weeks. Scotty, of course, can’t think of one question. Not one.

Remembering the money comment and the fact that he felt I had negotiated him down, I had no choice but to assume this was a job action, of sorts. He was paid less than he thought he was worth, based on his extensive market research into the shoot genre, so he would give us no more tonight. He was done, and he went and sat in a corner and shut down.

We were almost all packed and desperate to get the hell out of Dodge with the footage. Scotty keeps asking us to hang out and take him to find a

bar that would be airing a pay-per-view MMA match that was on. He needed a ride, that was all. If we had evaporated once he was driven to the bar showing the match he would be fine with that. Nope, not hanging. We are heading out.

"Hey listen, can you at least get me to the supermarket?" Scotty asks. Hell, that's always my back up when I can't find a pub airing a big MMA pay-per-view, so I must have felt a simpatico with him. I have Craig take him hunting for a Shop Rite. It would give me a minute to drop in a chair and ask Anthony if he was as ready to explode as I was.

We are both unnerved, but we both agree we got the show, and that's what it's all about. I'm there to "get the show." Not to be comfortable. Not to make a new friend. Ultimately, if we get the show…job done. Some nights are harder than others. Some nights the night watchman puts up a fight. But if we load the vans, pull into the joint, get the goods, and ride out by sunrise, then we accomplished the mission. I thought we did. Well, no sense in sitting around. Let's wait at the cars, we can just wave our goodnights to Scotty.

We don't make it to the parking lot. Craig and Scotty are walking down the hallway to the hotel room door and Scotty is happy. He's smiling and he thanks me profusely and says it was fun.

And he is carrying four shopping bags filled with boxes of cereal. They are all different brands. He hadn't just seen his favorite brand was on sale and picked up a bunch to take back home on the flight the next morning. Homeboy had a variety of cereal, eight boxes at least. I didn't even see milk.

I was too spent and annoyed to even ask. It was the final act in the Raven Follies and I was ready for the curtain. I left. The *Guest Booker* show ended up selling very well, and who would have thought the secret recipe was prime rib, pie a la mode, and Cap'n Crunch.

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As trying as some talent are, we have found there are far more gems than not. There are those times you see a talent on TV for years, then you meet them in person, work with them, and you feel they could be your long-lost uncle. You have a connection, they deliver a great show, and you part admiring them more than you'd ever imagined. Such was the case with

Gary Hart. But, as consistent with the yin-and-yang of life, it was also tragic.

Gary Hart worked as a wrestler, then more famously as a manager in the Dallas territory, and was its booker for a time. It was a no-brainer to have him on *Guest Booker.* I'd never met Gary and knew nothing of him personally. He was a dastardly dude on TV, but that means nothing of his personal life. You hope for the best and roll camera. I'd not even spoken with him on the phone or email beforehand. I booked him through a third party so they were my only contact. Again, not necessarily a recipe for disaster at all. It's just a little easier on me as a host when the guest and I have some rapport, some established connection. Going in cold can be tough.

A great tactic we use when we can is to take the guest out to dinner beforehand. Everyone is relaxed, happy, and the air is free to talk about anything under the sun. A couple of hours later, my banter with the guest seems effortless. Unless, of course, you're playing electronic trivia while eating your prime rib rather than opening up to your hosts. Oy.

But for Gary there was no time for dinner or anything. We set up somewhere in Fuckwad, Pennsylvania and waited for Gary to be delivered to us after finishing his prior appearance. He arrived and I got the call on my cell and I headed to the lobby to meet Gary and the promoter. They were engaged in conversation regarding logistics and travel for his appearances so I didn't even get to talk to Gary on the walk to the room. Once he was inside, he sat down and we looked each other in the face for the first time.

Gary Hart was one of the most gentle, sweet men I had ever met. Yeah, I've heard all the stories about Gary on the road, straight-edged razor in his breast pocket and I have no doubt this Chicago tough guy had his moments in years gone by. But on this night in March 2008, the 66 year old Hart was wise and kind. I'm repeating this but, yes, he felt like an uncle that held me as a baby years ago. He was egoless and had a great sense of humor. I am not bullshitting when I tell you *everyone* from KC in that room that night absolutely loved Gary.

After we shot, we sat and talked some UFC, of which Gary was a fan. He was a great conversationalist. His episode of *Guest Booker,* centered around saving the dying Dallas territory in 1986, was superb. It was truly a historian's dream to have such a legend discuss history like that. I don't

know a human being alive that didn't have great things to say about *Guest Booker with Gary Hart.*

Craig on our crew is a big guy. He's burly, tattooed, a Harley guy. He didn't know who Gary Hart was. Craig had watched WWE, ECW, and a little WCW toward the end of it's run. He didn't watch the syndicated Dallas shows from the Sportatorium. At the end of the night while walking back to the cars, Craig spoke up.

"Yo. I'm gay for Gary Hart."

Pretty much sums it up.

A day later I wake up to a few messages sitting on my phone. I hadn't had coffee yet so I didn't check them, but the phone keeps buzzing. The top text message is odd. It's from James Soubasis.

Did Gary Hart die? it read. As soon as I read it, the phone rings. It's Eric Simms. I answer.

"You got a piece of history there, brother," he says.

"I guess it's true then. I haven't had a chance to check yet."

And that's how I found out that our new surrogate uncle had filmed his edition of *Guest Booker*, gone home, and died.

I was thrown for a loop and I carried that with me all day long. I thought about the great edition of the show we had in the can, which I was excited to release. Given these new circumstances though, I was wrestling with our responsibility. I didn't want to seem opportunistic. During the day, the wrestling news sites that carried his death were reporting his final days, so naturally Kayfabe Commentaries was mentioned as having been the last company to work with him.

Around mid-day I get a call from a number I don't recognize in Texas. A quiet, distressed voice on the other end, barely audible, asks for me.

"It's me."

"Hi Sean. This is Jason, Gary Hart's son." He sounded raw with grief. It was a cutting and powerful moment. I stopped in my tracks.

"God, Jason, I'm so very sorry for your loss. It's all of our loss. We admired your father so much after working with him. This is devastating."

Gary had talked about his family to us a lot that night, off-camera. It was so clear he loved his family and I told that to Jason. One of the reasons he called was to ask if I had seen anything wrong with him, any indication there was something askew with his health. I hadn't. I assured Jason that his father would not in any way be shown in a poor light in that video. He was

well spoken, smart, and funny. And that's what the world would see when the show was released.

I decided to wait on the release. Our name was being so closely linked with Gary's after his death that I thought it would distract from the real purpose of the video, which was to celebrate Gary's life as a booker. Rushing this out would only link his *Guest Booker* to his death. I didn't want that, and I told Jason.

He said he appreciated that. Having earned trust, his family said they wished to have the show released whenever we felt it was best. They left that judgment in our hands. I talked with Jason a few more times. Both he and his brother, Chad, seemed to have such close relationships with Gary. I asked Jason to send me photos of he and his brother with their dad to place in the end credits of Gary's edition of *Guest Booker*. I wanted photos from their lives as his sons, not wrestling photos. The photos we were given were so personal and great for the show. We used them in the end credits and dedicated the show to Jason and Chad.

I think that would have made Gary happy.

. . .

There are a few notable near misses we've had trying to get the best wrestling minds in the world on the *Guest Booker* series. Verne Gagne was the one-time owner and promoter of what is largely considered one of wrestling's "Big Three" promotions in wrestling history, the AWA. Verne was its top star for years and his legacy was synonymous with the federation. He was one of the final holdouts when Vince McMahon began buying out promoters and their territories. In simple terms, in wrestling history Verne Gagne was a major player.

In 2008, the 82 year-old Verne was long retired from promoting, having lost his AWA to the clutches of McMahon years ago. But his place in wrestling history was solidified and as more and more wrestling history found its way to the Internet and bookstores, a new appreciation for the AWA and Verne Gagne was fostered among younger fans. When I found out we may have a shot at having Verne on *Guest Booker,* I was beyond elated. His son Greg Gagne, a former AWA star and an assistant booker to his father, would be accompanying him out here for a convention. I moved quickly and booked both of them to appear on the show.

I knew Verne's health wasn't great. The booking exercise of the show can be demanding and Greg told me Verne's memory was touch and go, so I thought having Greg sitting there with us would serve as a great safety measure. The Gagne camp accepted the gig and the date was set.

Things got rocky early in the day of the shoot as there was word of bad weather in Minnesota, which is where they would be flying out of. There was a series of delays and we were told if it got too late, Verne wouldn't be able to get on the plane with Greg. I stayed optimistic. We actually shot the intro to the show earlier that day, and in it I say "join us for *Guest Booker*...with The Gagnes."

Well, if you watch that intro now you may notice my lips saying "with The Gagnes" but hear the words "with Greg Gagne." Verne wasn't well enough to fly that late at night, so we waited for Greg to come in and cover this edition of the show on his own. I dubbed the "Greg Gagne" into the intro in post-production. We would still have Verne's son there to take us inside the AWA and many of Verne's decisions. He was there for all of it.

This didn't eliminate the problem of the flight delays, though. Greg was supposed to be in town at around 7 p.m., and every hour or so the flight would get pushed further back. When he finally got on a plane near 11:00 p.m., we planned to get him in and start rolling around 2:00 a.m. What can you do?

We killed time in the hotel bar, watching the workers in their natural habitat. Boy, do they seem comfortable in the pub. We sat at a table with our friend The Honky Tonk Man, who had just launched our new series *YouShoot,* which you'll hear all about in the next chapter.

The standout moment of the night involved Olympic strongman Ken Patera. Ken is shot out of a cannon. He's loud and boisterous. I think he's funny as hell, you just have to laugh with him. At some point during the night, Ken is picked up and brought to the hotel and once walking in the door he bee-lines it for the bar, bags still in hand. The hell with check-in! Once in the bar, he asks his driver who he will be working with. The driver points to another prominent shoot interview producer, who is standing at the bar drinking a banana daiquiri with a friend.

"You're shooting with *him*," the driver says.

Ken looks over from across the room and he stares.

In the pub, there aren't many beverages being consumed other than the dark green or dark brown bottles of beer. We aren't exactly at the Ritz

Carlton. I think I was even having a Heineken rather than my usual scotch. It was a pretty blue collar scene.

However the other shoot interview producer is sipping a banana daiquiri in a rather lovely glass complete with fruit garnish and an umbrella. This sight is not lost on Ken Patera. From across the room, Patera's booming voice takes over the room.

"He's drinking a cunt drink!" Patera bellows as he points at the producer. "Look at him! He's got a cunt drink! Jesus Christ!" It was hilarious.

Ken, along with his shoot producer for the night, with daiquiri, head out to get their business done. We wait for Greg, who finally arrives, exhausted no doubt. We head up to the room and knock out a *Guest Booker* that neither he nor I were in the mood for.

The theme of the show was the opposition attempt to Vince McMahon, when Verne and some other promoters banded to run head-to-head with Vince in his markets and on TV. The organization was called Pro Wrestling USA and it didn't last more than a couple of years. It's a topic I find fascinating so I really enjoyed the top half of that *Guest Booker,* where we discussed the run. The booking exercise, however, came up a little flat as Greg relied for too heavily on what decisions I would make.

Verne's condition would decline rapidly after this and maybe it's best he didn't appear on-camera. His memory loss and dementia came on rapidly and he was placed in a Bloomington, Minnesota facility for full time care. In 2009, Verne was involved in an altercation at the home wherein he slammed 97 year-old resident Helmut Gutmann to the ground, causing injuries that would kill Gutmann a few weeks later. Though ruled a homicide, the Hennepin County prosecutor deemed Verne unfit for trial.

Helmut Gutmann was a survivor of the Nazis who fled Germany. He kicked out of Adolf Hitler, but not Verne Gagne.

Not long after that, I made my first overture to Pat Paterson, the WWE booker for much of its most successful times. For me this would have been huge. I wanted to approach this situation with class. I got his address from another talent and I sent him a large Harry and David fruit basket. I also sent a copy of *Guest Booker* and told him to have a look at this groundbreaking show. They just might come calling some day.

And we did. And he said no. Pat is so closely tied to the WWE that even when he doesn't have a formal arrangement with them he sees working with other companies as blasphemy. It's really not. How can I produce a show

that purports to chronicle the most creative minds in wrestling and *not* have Pat Paterson on it? *That's* blasphemy.

I did have a face-to-face with Pat last year just before his autobiography came out. We sat and talked in a conference room and I laid out my intentions. We agreed that it's something he'd consider after the book had its run. Well, time's up. I need to talk to Pat again.

The other living name noticeably missing from the *Guest Booker* series is Jerry "the King" Lawler. Jerry's booking in Memphis made him a star and I think there are a million tidbits of wisdom he could impart. The problem is someone *doesn't* think there are tidbits of wisdom to impart. You know who? Jerry "The King" Lawler.

Shortly after the launch of the series I called Jerry at home. We talked for about a half hour, and it took about the first fifteen minutes of that to explain the premise of the show. It wasn't because Jerry is dumb. He's quite smart. He just thought the idea behind *our show* was dumb.

"Who the hell would watch that shit?" Jerry asked. I explained there was a whole market of fans that wanted to know the inner workings of the business and the reasons for decisions being made. This is at a time before a million podcasts and WWE Network. I had to try and convince Jerry people would want to hear him talk about this.

"Damn Sean, most of the time I made shit up in the car on the way to TV," King said. "It wasn't a big deal."

I told him to please just let me send him some DVDs and if wanted to watch them he could and he can let me know what he thinks. Or he could use them as drink coasters. Whatever. But if I didn't do everything to get King on *Guest Booker* then I'm failing our fans.

I sent the discs and I never heard from Jerry.

3. Wanna Shoot?

We'd recently launched *Guest Booker* and things were going well. People were taking notice of these guys coming "out of nowhere" and getting all the attention in the Internet wrestling community. The talk on the street was all positive. Fans found us to be playing "their music" and the Internet wrestling community immediately adopted our band as their own. More of my musical metaphor there. It's a pretty fair parallel though.

In late summer, after having put a few editions of *Guest Booker* behind us, I was taking a little break up in Nantucket with my wife and oldest daughter. I was sitting in bed flipping channels. The U.S. presidential race was heating up and candidates had taken to the stage to answer questions from citizens. Some people would be asking questions from the studio audience, while some had submitted them on video via YouTube.

To those immersed in today's world of social media it may be hard to consider that this was revolutionary and a real validation of online communication. Live TV talk shows would take phone calls from people all over the world up until then. But now video communication was accessible to all.

Naturally I had *Guest Booker* on my mind and seeing this on the TV gave me an idea for a special edition of the show. What if we had a booker take video submissions from fans, each suggesting some point in wrestling history that they would like to see rebooked? The show would feature 4 or 5

fans' videos asking, say Kevin Sullivan, to rebook angles. He'd sit before the cameras, we'd roll a clip of John from Delaware asking Sullivan if he could have used Ric Flair better in WWE in 1992, then Kevin would lay out his plan for 20 minutes or so. Then we'd go on to another fan submission video. It would take a very adept booker to field all those scenarios and be interesting enough with each one. But what a great challenge. Hey, great title...*The Guest Booker Challenge*.

It turns out Anthony was watching the same presidential town halls and he was brainstorming as well. However his idea was far more risky and would serve as a game changer for our company and the whole business.

We traded emails the next day and Anthony asked if we could sustain an *entire* shoot interview with only questions from fans. To do so we would need a.) a lot of damn questions and b.) someone entertaining as hell. We would need a lightning rod who would make fans run to their computers and fire up the webcams and log into email accounts. We would need massive fan participation to sustain enough submissions for a two-hour show.

We would need The Honky Tonk Man.

HTM was shoot interview gold. We worked with him in our mp3 commentaries so we knew him and we knew he delivered. His previous shoot interviews with other companies exhibited him as a lightning rod for sure. He talked like a man with nothing to lose, and more than a few axes to grind. Fans loved to wind him up, and I had no doubt that a few fans might try and take liberties with HTM, throwing an insult or two his way. I knew Honky wouldn't back down and he would be at the top of his game going back at some string bean armed basement dweller telling Honky he was a loudmouth has-been. Conceptually this could be an incredible amount of fun.

Shortly after a few *Guest Bookers* hit the market I was on Bryan Alvarez's *Figure Four Weekly* radio show. We talked *Guest Booker* and the merits of honoring classic bookers. Bryan and his partner Dave Meltzer are wrestling historians and collectively responsible for probably 90% of the wrestling news that hits the market, or they were at that time. When I was on the show I hadn't mentioned the new series we were planning, now called *YouShoot.* But at the very end of our call, after we went off air, I dropped the concept and Bryan was like a kid in a candy store.

“You mean fans send in questions on video and the Honky Tonk Man makes fun of them and rips on them for two hours?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“That’s amazing!”

“Bryan,” I said, “I thought you guys were too serious to talk about something so salacious after talking about *Guest Booker* for an hour, so I didn’t bring it up.” A pause.

“Are you kidding me?!” he hilariously yelled. This was going to be a hit.

We would be shooting The Honky Tonk Man in Levittown, Pennsylvania out in Bucks County. Unfortunately. We were using a suite in a chain hotel, which turned out to be a little more like a roadside motel. Decent food was hard to come by and the hotel rooms were shitty. We were first shooting The Iron Sheik and his manager Eric Simms in an Investigative Special about their business relationship, and then we were doing a full turnaround for the first *YouShoot.* Honky was down in his room waiting for the call.

We often shoot in large hotel suites for our shows, similar to a lot of news magazine show interviews. Logistically it makes sense. The talent are most often staying in a hotel while in town. So if we can get a suite in their hotel or one nearby it’s more convenient. The best hotel suites for our productions are large and square, with no nooks or turns or cluttered walls. We toss much of the furniture into the adjacent bedroom and use the large living room for the show. The closer we can get to negative space, the better.

The hotel in Levittown was dated and dirty. We moved the couch and there was a used crack pipe beneath it. Comically enough, when we told Eric Simms the room number to meet us in, he said “That’s the room Sheik and New Jack were in last night.”

I told him “One of your clients left something in the room under the couch. I kicked it into the bedroom if you want it.” He didn’t.

We started rolling on *Rebuilding the Sheik,* and it went long. No one had touched base with Honky so it turned out he was sitting in his room, and pissed. As a matter of fact, he wasn’t coming out. Simms comes back to the room while we’re scrambling to figure out how to turn this room into a *YouShoot* set. What *was* a *YouShoot* set anyway? Simms tells me about Honky’s refusal to come out and he asks me to come down and try and talk to him. Assuaging talent is a good skill to have, kids.

I get there and Honky starts bellyaching about how he had no idea what was going on, and he was bored watching college football and, big problem, folks...he couldn't drink his gimmick.

"Damn, Sean," he says, "I got this whole bottle here I'm staring at and I can't drink any or else I'm going to sleep and you ain't getting a show! I was saving this for your shoot."

Now, he's waving around a huge bottle of Gatorade while he's saying this. For all I know he's very into energy drinks. Then I remember our quest for the Extra Smooth gimmick. I think what we have here, ladies and gentlemen, is a Gatorade mixer. Either way he's hyped up and ready to go. I offer him food, whatever we can find in that town that would deliver. We get a chicken wing order going and we head to the room.

The content of *YouShoot: Honky Tonk Man* is fantastic. He's in rare form, classic HTM shoot-style. He's mellowed a lot in later years, but he had fire back then. He was so damn funny when he was shooting. We had a great show to kick off this new series.

It's also one episode I hate to look at and, like most of our stuff, I've only seen it a handful of times once out of editing. The lighting was totally eaten by the white walls in that room. It has this faded look. The laptop we were using also began freaking out. Intermittently its fan started making this whirring sound, really loud. If we were using lavalier body mics back then it would have been lower. But the damn shotgun boom mic was five feet away so me, Honky, and the laptop fan were all in its sphere. It's a flat visual and audio result and it makes me cringe. But it's also the first *YouShoot* so it could be considered to have some of that beginner's crudeness. The content is good enough to distract from the technical challenges.

In going over our list of controversial and outspoken talent for *YouShoot*, there were plenty to choose from. Missy Hyatt was our second guest on the show. She had just written a kiss and tell autobiography so it was time to get Missy in the hotseat. We wouldn't just ask Missy about the more colorful exploits in her long tenure in wrestling. Shit, Regis can do that. Herein we would stumble upon another *YouShoot* trademark in prepping for this show–the *YouShoot* games.

Why *ask* Missy about the size of the workers' dicks when we can have her place magnetic pricks of varying sizes on the board beside the names of workers? And football players. And actors. Made sense to me!

Today it's become a challenge for Anthony to come up with a new game or two tailored to each guest. It's a bit of a prison and can be challenging. But it's so worth it when you can play "Pick a Hand" with RVD or have Alberto Del Rio do a tequila taste test. New Jack allegedly beat the shit out of a vendor for giving him a 7-Up instead of a Sprite, so we called him to the carpet and had him take that blind taste test. Can anyone tell the goddamn difference between the two? He did.

The game "What's in the Bag?" is a staple of the show now. I reach into a gym bag and hold up curious items and the guest says the first name from the wrestling business that comes to mind. It's an incriminating psychology test. They would be shows a bag of weed, pill bottle, bag of coke, and maybe a giant plastic penis or two, usually one black and one Caucasian. The origin of those actually had nothing to do with that game. We ordered them as a rib we never pulled off. Pun intended.

The plan involved Super Agent Eric Simms. Often during convention weekends we will find ourselves dining in the hotel restaurant with a large group consisting of our crew, talent, promoters, and agents. We were awaiting the next such gathering and a willing waitress to help us deliver Eric Simms his beverage in an unforgettable way. You see, the plastic dicks are actually thermoses. They came with a thick straw and screw cap that we obviously removed for the *YouShoot* game. In a full pub with all eyes on the big table of wrestlers, Eric was to be delivered his drink order in the "Robert Fuller Souvenir Cup."

Anyway, Missy was great. She talked about everything under the sun. Except the one thing that apparently hadn't seen the sun was her hair. Her blonde locks were one of her trademarks, but she called me a couple of weeks before the show with a concern.

"Sean, I just want to let you know I dyed my hair black. Is that okay?"

Did I have a choice? As long as Missy was Missy on-camera, did it really matter? This wasn't exactly like Farrah Fawcett dying her hair black in 1978. But it was part of her trademark look. Ultimately, this new show broke all the rules anyway. The idea grew on me. It was like rebellion.

Sandman was up next. He's another loudmouth with almost zero filter. Sandman and *YouShoot* are a marriage made in heaven. Sandman is a prototypical worker in some ways, but very antithetical in others. I find him amusing and, at times, fascinating. It's a special kind of fascinating, like

when you're left with your mouth agape, staring at Sandman, shaking your head. Like…"whaaat?"

The thing that makes Hak (Sandman's affectionate nickname) so different from other workers in the business is that he is honest to a fault. He will kiss no ass, hold back on not a single comment or story about anyone in the business. It doesn't matter who it is and what he'd have to lose by telling the story about them, or saying how he truly feels about them.

So many workers are cautious about their tongues these days. They are very conscious of whom they might piss off and what that might cost them. The young guys who get released from WWE are the worst. Every story has two sides, and nothing was that bad, and everyone was great. "Cena is awesome...Vince was cool with me...Sheamus was okay…" Then the cameras go off and they turn to me and say, "Dude, by the way, Sheamus is a total asshole." I've specifically gotten that one by WWE cast-offs under 35 years old.

Hak calls it like it is. Always has, always will. You can understand why a 30 year-old guy would want to keep a doorway open to go back to WWE. Truthfully though, I don't really care. I have programming to produce. If you come on *YouShoot* and agree to be honest, then you have to do that. You come off wishy-washy and non-committal to your own opinions, the fans feel screwed and trust me, you're on their shit list. I have to think about the fans here in the underbelly. That's who we serve with *YouShoot.* The fans in the arenas are not my concern.

Thankfully we had none of that to worry about with Sandman. Actually we had a great crop of *YouShoot* guests for the first few years. Shooters all of them–Honky Tonk, Missy, Sandman, Jamie Dundee, Sabu, Bob Holly, New Jack, Jim Cornette, Maria Kanellis, Sean Waltman, The Iron Sheik, Tony Atlas, Kevin Nash, Teddy Long are among those that were so great.

The tight-asses in wrestling who take their shit too seriously take issue with the *YouShoot* series. Their inflated sense of purpose elevates them to a pedestal above the fray, imperiously looking down on the series and its participants. They see the series as mean spirited, and often posit that the guests are forced to say terrible things about their friends. How noble stand such greats of both yester-yester-yesteryear and today's denizens of VFW Halls and Elks Lodges. Perhaps, and this is bold, you are just too good for *YouShoot.* Our pedestrian fun is trite, whilst your moonsaults and arm bars are *art.*

This is such bullshit. You know the secret formula to the series? It ain't being mean, or an asshole. It's just having fun. That's it! Honesty and fun make for an entertaining *YouShoot.* If the guests are laughing beside me then that's like us sitting on the viewer's couch beside them, having a ball. Maria Kanellis can laugh about ranking WWE Diva's boobs as "real" or "fake." Nash can do his best French Canadian accent as he acts out Pat Paterson giving a worker a finish. Tony Atlas can do fifteen minutes on the psychology behind his fetish for women walking on his face.

Sandman would be as entertaining as ever on his *YouShoot*. He was pounding his trademark beers on-camera, just as he did in ECW rings and weekly TV for years. By the end of the first 6-pack he was on the floor acting out 2 Cold Scorpio straddling a young lady and whipping her in the face with his legendary appendage. Sandman was *having fun.* So was Scorpio, from the sounds of it.

Listen, the series isn't for everyone. Do I really expect Bruno Sammartino to do *YouShoot* and put Penny Banner in the "Ho-Bag?" It's not the show for him. I don't expect Harley Race to reveal gangbangs with half a dozen St. Louis rats while Paul Boesch and Sam Muchnick beat off on the sidelines. I wouldn't ask him to be on the show. But how many of the workers out there have earned that elder statesman status? How many wrestlers have a stalwart legacy to protect?

Life is too damn short. You're not doing God's work, kid. It's pro wrestling, magic, illusion. I have done a few hundred major movies and TV shows on both sides of the camera and I even shake my head in disbelief at how some of these *auteurs* direct their films. You're making a movie, dude. Disposable entertainment. Keep it real, it's only rock 'n roll.

Sandman understood that because that's who he is. And he was a great guest.

We did have the opportunity to dine with Sandman prior to shooting. We shot in the same hotel that we did *Guest Booker with Kevin Sullivan.* It was actually the same room. The restaurant on-site was a steakhouse and when I met Eric Simms and Hak in the elevator I asked if they'd like to go to the steakhouse for dinner. I saw them exchange a knowing glance as they accepted. *Haha, money marks,* they no doubt were thinking. I didn't give a shit. Happy talent is what I want.

We came at this business from the entertainment world, not the wrestling world. When you work on a TV show or a movie, you are taken care of.

There is food and beverage. There are people making sure you are comfortable. Remember, happy talent make for good performances. If Hak wants a steak, I'm getting him one. In two hours that dude is going to be crawling on the floor mimicking 2 Cold and his big, black, dick for my cameras. Eat up, Hak.

We are sitting at the restaurant and when it comes time for Hak to place his order he asks why a steakhouse wouldn't have surf and turf on the menu. The server's answer was clearly insufficient as Hak tossed the menu down and barked "Get the chef."

Once the waiter was out of sight Hak leaned in to impart his wisdom. "Chefs *love* this shit. They hate cooking off the menu. When someone comes in with a challenge they love it!"

The chef came out, they negotiated a steak and seafood special a la Fullington. He drank two, tall Long Island iced teas like they were Lipton iced teas. We ate, the talent was happy, and he was ready to shoot. And drink beer.

I have worked with Sandman several times after this and he currently has no idea who I am. I sat with him for *hours* on these shows and when Tod Gordon mentions me to him he squints and tilts his head.

"Who, buddy?"

. . .

In most things, there is an edge. There is a narrow end of sidewalk, of rooftop, of cliff. Excitement and entertainment live on that edge. Something that takes you right to the edge, with enough time to look down at the drop, and then ultimately keeps you from plunging, is what entertainment is. It is the action film and the roller coaster.

In the film, the world can't explode. Your roller coaster cannot slide off the rails and crash. That's actually easy. It's far harder to keep the speeding ton of metal on the track, defying all laws of gravity.

If you have seen *YouShoot: Jamie Dundee*, then you know exactly what I am talking about.

Shortly before his time with us, the wrestler Jamie Dundee did a shoot interview for another company. It got some attention because of the more outrageous things he was saying. There was nothing politically correct about Jamie, and nothing racially sensitive. Jamie was a true good ol' boy

from the south, with a mean streak. He was a loose cannon. He would *have* to do *YouShoot.*

Booking Jamie proved an adventure and an education. It had nothing to do with him. Rather, it was the third party promoter I was booking him through. Anytime you hinge your booking on another person there is potential for problems. The pro wrestling aftermarket is the swamp. The dwellers in this part of the business run the gamut from dishonest, to bumbling, to barely passable.

A promoter type, let's call him Len, asked me who I wanted for upcoming shows. I said Jamie Dundee.

"Really?" he said. "You think anyone cares about him?"

"Len, trust me. This shoot he just did with that company is so controversial," I assured him. "He's going to generate sales."

He shrugged. "Hmm. Okay. I'll try and get him for you. How much?"

I do not remember the actual figures so let's use some round numbers.

"Five hundred," I replied.

"Okay," Len said. "Plus there's gonna be some travel expenses."

"That's fine, we will split that."

And off he went, to fetch me Jamie Dundee for *YouShoot.* The good news came back a few days later. Jamie would do the show. My share of the expenses was, let's say, $200. I was splitting that with Len and his partner, since they would be using Jamie for a signing at a store.

Then things got weird. Jamie calls me. He initially agreed to the deal but is now saying it seems he's being asked to film for a long time for what I'm paying.

"Man," he says into the phone, "for a little more than the $250 I'm getting from you I would *really* turn it on for the cameras, you know?"

What the fuck?

"How much, Jamie?"

"The guy said you're paying him $250 for me," he said. That slimy, asshole promoter was going to take my $500 for Jamie, plus my $200 for expenses and give Jamie $250 and shove the remaining $450 into his pocket!

It got worse.

"Jamie I am going to pay you five hundred because that's what I offered you. That dude was lifting from your envelope."

"Damn, man, I shouldn't even do their fuckin' video now."

Wait, their *what?*

“What video?” I asked, keeping my cool.

“They want to do a shoot interview with me before I do yours.”

This Len prick was amazing. First he tries to rob me and Jamie. Then, after I mention that I wanted him to get me Jamie because I saw value in him, he decides he’s in the shoot business now and will be filming with him, and essentially stepping on my product. If this were the coke business he would have had a cavalry of Colombian hitmen at his house.

“Jamie, if I gave you seven hundred would you have laryngitis for their show?” I actually said this.

“Bro you’re the one helping me out I’ll do whatever you want.” I decided not to mess with their shoot. They were going first, I didn’t want them messing with his schedule or going long on purpose so our shoot would be compromised.

I told Jamie I’d see him in Pennsylvania for the shoot and I couldn’t call Len fast enough. I straightened him out and told him KC was only going to get bigger and if he wanted a piece of the action booking for us he would now follow new rules. First, he was never to touch money. I paid the talent I used whether or not he booked them. Second, Jamie’s shoot aside, I wouldn’t take any talent that he planned on doing video with, because now we aren’t partners, we are competitors.

In my berating him, he actually tried to defend his actions by saying he had to make something on the deal for his time booking everything. While that may be true, did this asshole really think he was worth the exact same take as the talent? He was taking $250 for himself and giving Jamie, the star of my show, $250. On top of that, his telling Jamie I was only paying $250 was deliberately dishonest. Unreal.

The day came and as we were setting up an uncooperative suite in a large hotel, we were listening to a ruckus beyond explanation coming from directly above us. There’s yelling, stomping, bodyslamming, who knows what else. We were playing music and it was still cutting through.

I was in the bathroom and the vent above the toilet lent a much clearer ear into the room upstairs. Hey, I know that voice. It’s The Iron Sheik. And I know that other voice too. It’s Jamie Dundee! The Iron Sheik and Jamie Dundee were shooting Len’s mess of an interview right above us. I could not believe what I was hearing, and could only imagine what was going to be coming down to our production in an hour or so. Given the players, I had

every reason to suspect that the D.E.A. or at the very least hotel management might step in and mess up plans.

About an hour later there is a knock on the door. Len, his people, Sheiky baby, and Jamie are there. I exchange warm hellos with Sheiky. Len is telling me that they're gonna run out for five minutes and they'll deliver Jamie back to me.

At least I think that's what he's saying. I can't take my eyes off a shirtless Jamie Dundee wearing a large, leather *Crocodile* Dundee type hat. His eyeballs were literally vibrating, he was swaying back and forth, and he was so red. His entire body was sweating and beet red. I don't know if I was concerned or terrified, but I do know that I had no idea how I would get a two-hour video out of that action standing in the doorway.

True to their word, the group returns and unleashes Jamie on us. He was manic. He could not sit still. If you've seen the show then you know his attention span was that of a tsetse fly. He was bounding all over the room, in his chair, out of his chair, kissing the computer and kissing me. He was in it for the long haul though, and we got through all the questions.

I am asked all the time about how I got through that interview. People think I hated it. It was exhausting but I didn't hate it. I knew it was entertaining and although Jamie was definitely in an altered state, he answered everyone's questions earnestly, to say the least. From his Wikipedia page to any online biography you can find, Jamie's *YouShoot* is referenced as a highlight of sorts.

There's a remarkable moment that we used at the end if you watched through the credits. Jamie was asking me if he could have a copy of the DVD when released. I said yes and asked him where to send it. I grabbed a pen and paper and stood at the ready for the address. And he gave it to me.

"Jamie's mama," he said.

"Huh?" I replied. I had no idea what the hell he meant.

"Jamie's *mama,"* he repeats, more emphatically. To help me, you see.

"Where do I send it?" I asked again.

"Anyone wants to send something to me, it goes to mama," he clarified.

Still no address. Did he really think "Jamie's mama" was sufficient addressing for a package? And he says it *twice*, with no address as a follow up. I'm standing there with a pen in hand with only "Jamie's mama" to go on. Lord, it was time to get the hell out of town. Jamie was picked up and taken right to the airport. Shortly after returning home, fist full of our cash,

Jamie went out, copped some illegal substances and got arrested on six charges driving around down in Kentucky.

ECW sensation Sabu's edition of *YouShoot* was a much more controlled shoot. Sabu was honest and entertaining, oh, and sober. He told great stories about his legendary uncle, the original Sheik, about wild ECW exploits, and a story about Kurt Angle, an injury he sustained, and some painkillers. We did a great show and parted.

Months later, after the release of *YouShoot: Sabu*, we headed out to Pennsylvania (where, I'm realizing, a lot of stupid shit happens to me) early one morning to meet up with Terry Funk to shoot some promos for an upcoming *Ring Roasts*, to be discussed later. Me, Anthony, and James Soubasis, who was producing the roast with us, got to Terry's room at a motel, did a quick green screen setup with a single camera, and shot some teasers for the upcoming event. We wrapped up pretty quickly and took Terry to breakfast at a Denny across the parking lot.

As we are walking across the lot, a car comes flying in and pulls to a stop beside us. We stop and watch as Sabu, former ECW referee Bill Alfonso, and Ref Pee Wee, a staple of Sabu's travel contingent, come pouring out of the car. They were quite a scene, even at 11 a.m.

Sabu rushes over to me with something clearly desperate on his mind.

"Hey, that story I told about Kurt Angle and the pills, can you cut that out of my show?" Apparently Sabu didn't realize that after a show is released on DVD, has been bought by the general public, as well as seen on VOD by many, that it's not possible to recut the DVDs already sold and enter the memory banks of the people who watched the show and erase them.

"Well, Sabu, the show has been out for months," I replied.

"Ah shit. Oh well," he shrugged, heading back to his posse.

4. Liftoff

We were in a groove with the attention that *Guest Booker* had gotten us and also the success of *YouShoot.* We'd really connected with fans that began to have a cult-like dedication to us and our shows. They really saw us as one of them, which we were. Plus, we were so tapped into what the shoot fans thirsted for. It was like we were reading their minds and producing content that spoke to their hearts, their passion.

A string of *YouShoots* featuring New Jack, Bob Holly, and Maria Kanellis, straight off her appearance on Donald Trump's reality show *The Celebrity Apprentice,* were turning our viewers into disciples. It was around this time we started to notice WWE emulating some of our content. They were just borrowing pieces, it hadn't gotten as obvious and rampant as it would become a few years from then. After all the talk about our *YouShoot* series giving fans access to the stars on video, we saw solicitations from WWE to send your questions in for their John Morrison DVD. They'd later go full blast with a show called *In Box* or something like that on their WWE Network.

It didn't bother me because I knew WWE could never deliver on the overarching promise of *YouShoot*, which was an uncensored shoot. Talent answers what the *fans want to know,* and not *what WWE allows fans to want to know.* On *YouShoot* if you wanted to ask Scott Hall what city had the best rats (wrestling groupies), you could. And he'd answer! The shareholder-

sensitive WWE could never televise honesty. We really gave that show to the fans. The cats in Connecticut playing corporate rock could never survive in the punk clubs. I didn't sweat it.

As well as we were doing, our business went to the stratosphere when I got one of my dream bookings for *Guest Booker,* in one Mr. Jim Cornette. Jim was a great heel manager in years past and had long retired. He'd worked on the creative side of the business in multiple companies and even ran his own. I had seen him on some shoot DVDs and thought he was beyond entertaining. He was so wrestling-smart. With our commitment to format and production I thought we could spotlight him perfectly.

Remember, this was the age before podcasts and WWE Network. Companies like ours were the voice for wrestlers of yesteryear. And I thought Cornette's voice would fit perfectly with what we were doing.

Jim's first appearance for Kayfabe Commentaries was on *Guest Booker.* We charged him with the rebooking of the WWE's botched Invasion angle, after their purchasing the WCW's roster. Jim arrived on set with pages and pages of notes. He said he was up all night in the hotel prepping the show. His commitment impressed me and his show was so well received by critics and fans alike that it stands as the company's best seller to date. This was a game changer yet again. The amount of thought and preparation raised the bar.

Jim would return for an appearance on *YouShoot,* wherein fans flooded us with questions. We got so many we had to separate them onto two separate shows–one that focused on wrestling questions and one show that featured questions about all the other odds and ends of life. His first *YouShoot* was a double disc clocking in at over three and a half hours of absolute hilarity. Shortly after that release we put out the *Lost Questions* edition which featured all the oddball questions we couldn't get to in his first *YouShoot.*

Corny's *Guest Booker* and *YouShoot* blew up. It created a resurgence in Jim's popularity and solidified his place as wrestling's most prominent "shooter." We were happy to do that for him, as he was the real deal. The Jim Cornette you see on our shoots is the real article. He's intense, frantic, manic, obsessive, and troubled. But he's also smart, verbose, colorful, and charismatic. I love him for all of the above and he can consider Kayfabe Commentaries a second home. Our professional relationship would continue to grow, as you'll soon see.

As we started hitting the ball out of the park we saw the opportunity to become a full-fledged production company and produce multiple series. *Guest Booker* and *YouShoot* were solid concepts, very well defined. Our core base was growing and I thought we had room to explore a few more concepts and we went about green lighting some new series.

In order for anything to be green lit and shot, I need to see a very clear concept when it's pitched or it creeps into my head. I need to hear the type of theme music. I need to see a color pattern and the vague formation of a logo, maybe just a suggestion of a font. I need to sense the show, simply put. That may be hard to understand and I don't think I can explain it to make it less nebulous. An interior designer sees a vision when they walk into a space. *It's rustic, let's use lots of distressed woods, some leather and skins, large metal fixtures, dark wood floor.*

Anthony has pitched shows that I can't see a clear, hard identity for. I can't go all-in unless I can sense the show. We take this shit seriously so we absolutely *must* voice opposition when it exists. This is the business of creating, no different from the Rolling Stones, Aerosmith, or KISS and they sometimes throw guitars at each other and it's okay.

I know that sounds weird. There are shows that I have pitched for which Anthony doesn't think the logistics will work. There have been some heated discussions between us at meetings where Craig usually has to step in and find middle ground and try to keep us at the table. There are times one of us has gotten up to walk. Either Craig or common sense prevails and we get back to it. If the fighting is for the defense of one's creative vision then I think it's justified. As headstrong as I might be, I know my verbal opponent is working for what *he* thinks is the best show, advertising tactic, or scheduling suggestion. It's not like I'm mad about some dude showing up two hours late to a shoot or a meeting. This is the competition for creative ideas and I can duck a Gibson Les Paul in the heat of passion.

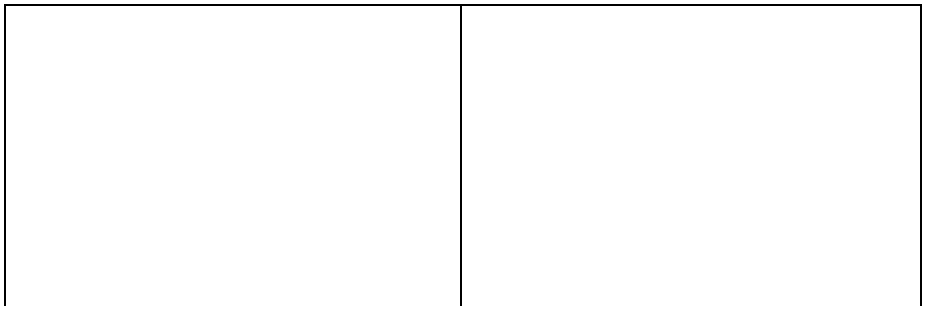
I always gravitate to the rock 'n roll metaphor, comparing us and our situations to that of Mick and Keith, Tyler and Perry, or Gene and Paul. In an amazingly accurate exhibition of our personality types, Anthony always disagrees with that. In his mind it is a relationship more comparable to Jobs and Wozniak in the world of computers, or Stan Lee and some Kirby guy in the comic book sphere. We, obviously, are only comparable to *any* such names in our delusional minds and there alone. But it's the best pronouncement of Anthony's and my character if you plan to work with us.

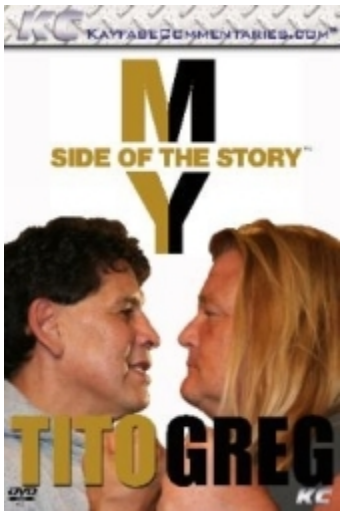
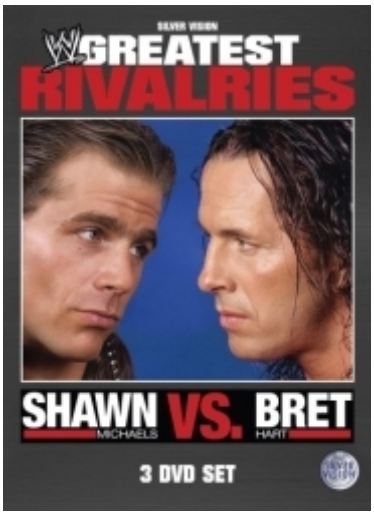
A couple of series that we managed to tug-of-war to the greenlight stage were *Ringside* and *My Side of the Story.* I was in a children's store with my wife and daughter and my wife came up to me with a book of fairy tales with an interesting gimmick. When read from the beginning to the halfway point it was the traditional tale you'd always heard. But when you flip the book over and read, it is the same fairy tale told from the perspective of the wicked witch, or whoever the heel was in that story. What a great idea…

...for a new series, honey! She was far less excited than I, but right there *My Side of the Story* hit me like a ton of bricks–two workers who shared the stage in a classic wrestling feud, first interviewed separately but asked the exactly the same questions. Each of their answers are edited beside each other to see how similarly or differently they remembered their time together. Then in the final segment they are reunited to go over their feud. It instantly crystallized in my mind. I could hear the epic, goliath theme music as two titans that cemented their on-screen hatred for each other with bloody matches that lasted for months, in some cases years, came together in this very unique format.

I could see the box cover instantly as well, borrowing elements from the old, classic boxing/wrestling posters. The combatants' faces would be near nose to nose, their names in bold, block letters. It was a celebration of their rivalry. We released an edition with Greg Valentine and Tito Santana, a huge WWE feud of the mid 80s, then an edition with Nikita Koloff and Magnum T.A., a huge NWA feud of the same era. The concept made such an impression on me. I loved that series.

Apparently the concept made an impression on WWE as well, as I'd mentioned previously we began to see more and more of our innovative programming ideas creeping into their products. Specific to *My Side of the Story,* three years after our series launch they produced a DVD called *Rivalries.* You can start at the box cover and draw conclusions from there. Yeah, right down to the first names.

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We launched the *My Side of the Story* series in December 2007 with the Santana/Valentine feud and we included a commemorative booklet in the DVD case which contained a short write up about the feud and then a complete listing of every time the two fought, the location, and the result. I wanted this to be the definitive word on a pro wrestling feud. If you had this DVD and booklet, you had it all. There was nothing more you'd need to know about the feud.

. . .

The *Ringside* series was an outgrowth of Anthony wanting to somehow incorporate our concept of the mp3 commentary tracks that we stopped, into a video project of some kind. The concept was unique, with the talent taking you through individual matches in real-time, like they were sitting with you watching them. There was the opportunity for interesting tidbits and great anecdotes to bubble to the surface with this format.

The big challenge was that we could never show video footage of the actual matches on our series as we didn't hold the rights to them. How the hell do you get around that? Why on earth would the talent and I be sitting there watching invisible matches we purposely aren't showing the viewer? It could be both confusing and disrespectful to the viewer.

We came to the classic ringside announcer's table as a theme. If the talent and I were sitting at the long, wooden table with the blocky TV monitor and two table microphones with thick, colorful foam covers, it would simulate

an old school play-by-play and color commentator watching the monitor while the match was in the ring before them. I lit the table very harshly from two side angles, a suggestion of the hot, overhead arena lights spilling from the ring onto the announce table below. It was shadowy and hot at the same time. It was a fun setup and I think it looked great. We would title it *Ringside* and even put a ringside security railing in the logo. It's all about strongly defined concept and theme.

The first edition of *Ringside* that we shot was not the one that launched the series. That happens from time to time as you'll read. Sometimes we have the series greenlit and we know what we want, and opportunity presents itself for a guest that would be great on the show, but not necessarily a name we think is big enough to launch the series pilot. We shoot it and it gives us a good look into what works and what might need tweaking. It shows us how we might ensure perfection for the pilot. Then we keep it in the can and air it after the pilot airs.

On a particularly insane day, we did our first setup ever for *Ringside* with guests Demolition, the bruising tag team champs from the late 90s WWE. Members Bill Eadie (Ax) and Barry Darsow (Smash) sat on the announce team set and carried out an odd request I had for them. For the top half of the show I wanted them to transform before our very eyes and apply their classic, full makeup on-camera, as they did for hundreds of nights as one of the most popular WWE tag teams ever. We shot this new show and it came off well, with Demolition explaining they had "A show" makeup and "B show" makeup. Back in the day they scaled the detail and difficulty of the particular makeup design they would apply based on the size and importance of the arena. For *Ringside* Barry did a pretty intricate design while Bill, who I love to death, applied what could be best described as "D show" makeup, with a big pink triangle on half his face, and nothing but skin tone below it.

Ringside with Demolition was also the first show for which we employed a two-camera setup. This was a morning that needed lots of attention. Here we had a new series that required a new set, with first time lighting, and the parameters for camera A and camera B within this new show.

Adding to the madness was my scheduling. After completing this challenging first shoot for *Ringside* in Newark, N.J., we would break down, load the cars, and rush west to Levittown, Pennsylvania. There we would shoot something we came to call *The Great Debate '08*, which was under

our *Investigative Specials* banner. Our *Investigative Specials* were reserved for topics about wrestling that didn't really fall into a series. They were one-off explorations of something or someone in wrestling. Earlier I referenced an *Investigative Special* with The Iron Sheik and manager-agent-thing Eric Simms called *Rebuilding the Sheik.*

Over in eastern Pennsylvania we would have to construct and light a mock presidential debate set for two legends. Bruno Sammartino (former WWE champion) and Harley Race (former NWA champion) would stand at two podiums and both debate the hot issues in wrestling, from two perspectives born of very different journeys in wrestling's golden age. It was a U.S. presidential election year, 2008. The debates were on TV and we sought to give wrestling fans a debate from the two most celebrated, elder statesmen in wrestling history.

As is typical with many of the days and nights discussed herein, my memories of this night are not of anything that was caught on-camera. Firstly Harley's flight was late. Really late. I met with Bruno in the lobby in the early evening. He invited me up into his room to talk about the show in detail. We chatted, I gave him the pitch, he talked history of a bit. I told him I knew almost everything about him and his career. I said I wanted to take him for a steak and a glass of wine before it got too late. Harley was slated to be in town around 8 p.m. which gave us some time to kill. Bruno was really touched and assured me I didn't have to do that. He imparted that it was totally unnecessary. I told him it would be my honor and he should let me do it. He laughed and shrugged. I would round up the guys and meet Bruno in the lobby.

Great plan, except out here in Dicklick, PA the aforementioned menu would be hard to conjure of any quality. Shit, even if we had to resort to a Longhorn to get some red meat, we could make that work. Bruno spent a life on the road. He'd understand.

We piled into a single car with Bruno sitting beside me. We headed out onto Bristol Pike in search of a good steak and red wine. I told Craig to just head south on that main drag. We were sure to hit a Miceli's Trattoria, Vito's Bistro, Longhorn, Outback or something.

Well, we didn't. It'd been a good ten minutes and I see fucking deer. Fine. U-turn and now head back north. We recover the spent road and break anew, heading further north. I'm hungry. More importantly, I'm embarrassed.

Bruno Sammartino is a tough negotiator when it comes to money. You're on your way to a great story later on when we cover his *Timeline.* However after the deal is done, there is no one more giving, trustworthy, and gentlemanly than Bruno Sammartino. He is of a bygone era where the handshake was a blood oath. We shook. We paid. Just the fact that I was trying to find Bruno a good meal was more than enough for him. He repeatedly told me not to worry. We can grab a bite at the hotel.

The Ramada played host to a comedy club room next to its restaurant. Performing that night were "Reverend" Bob Levy and his Killers of Comedy from the *Howard Stern Show*. There was no fucking way I was having my first and maybe only meal with the Living Legend, as Beetlejuice the microcephalic, Jeff the Drunk, and Sal the Stockbroker sat beside us. Keep driving, Craig.

The only food we passed on that Godforsaken road was a diner.

"Bruno," I started, "that diner we passed back there is the only thing we're gonna find unless we shoot our own. And I don't have a gun or the time to cook it."

"Oh, Sean that's fine."

"Are you sure? I'm sorry." I felt like the shitty, indie promoter I was destined never to be. *Hi Bruno. Like my blue jeans and South Park T-shirt? How about a Big Mac?*

"I'm absolutely fine with the diner," he assured. Craig got us there.

I step in wearing my suit leading the greatest WWE champion of all time. We walked past the locals and found a booth. If we weren't the oddest thing those patrons and workers saw that day then they were improvising such a scene and doing it well. Bruno ordered a half a chicken and a side dish that was forced on him in a hilarious exchange that Craig, Anthony, and I still reference with hilarity today. It helps when I do the Bruno impression. You get a side with the chicken. Bruno just wanted the chicken.

"Ohh, c'mon sweetie get yourself a side," the waitress said.

Bruno shrugged, and folded his hands. "I don't need it."

"How about some applesauce? Mmmmm," said Flo.

Bruno was flustered, and probably starving as I led a jaunt through the countryside, foolishly thinking I'd find a Ruth's Chris Steakhouse beside the chicken farms.

"No, I don't want it," he said, remaining polite.

“It comes with the meal. It’s free, honey.” This broad must’ve had a bonus in her deal if she moved the shitty sides with the entrees.

I don’t want to speak up for a grown man at the dinner table for Christ’s sake, but this was being overly hospitable. “Miss, can you just read off the sides?” She did.

“String beans, corn kernels, potato, apple sauce...you want applesauce, sweetie?”

Bruno, like it was the first time he heard it, looked up and said, “Okay, I’ll have the applesauce.” Boy was she happy. Me too.

We ate and talked wrestling, from WWE to Japan. The workers with whom I’ve become friendly outside the ring are actually the guys with whom I talk everything *but* wrestling. We do it on-camera for hours, but when we head to the pub or restaurant, I’m talking about Florida real estate cycles with Kevin Sullivan. Kevin Nash and I talk investments or entertainment, bellyaching about how residual payments have plummeted in size since digital exhibition has taken the place of the DVD. Whenever I bump into him, Shane Douglas and I always talk about his teenage son who I had the pleasure of meeting when he was about 9 or 10 on the set. I let him read my questions and direct his dad’s segment of a clip show we had called *Wrestling’s Most.* But with Bruno you talked wrestling.

In another classic exchange, many times recreated with my uncanny ability for impersonation, Craig talks Japan with Bruno. Craig inquires about the use of the youngboys and if the gaijin (Americans working in Japan) were allowed use of them. In the Japanese pro wrestling culture, a youngboy, or rookie breaking in, would work with a top star, carrying his bags, getting him around. If you were a marquis name, he was basically yours as he made his bones in the business, trained, and rose in ranks.

Strangely, Bruno no sells this. Not the fact that he may or may not have had a youngboy, but the existence of youngboys at all.

“I don’t know anything about that.” He didn’t even look up from the white meat. The use youngboys is a known practice not even debated or for any reason doubted. They existed. All the stars had them. It’s been written about, talked about, and not a big deal at all. They were acolytes on the culturally important Japanese hierarchy of respect for experience.

Uncomfortably for every *except* Craig apparently, he pressed on.

“You know, a youngboy. Guy that follows around the top names, doing things for them.” Bruno just shakes his head.

“Nah.” Mangles chicken. “Never heard it.”

Is it possible that he hadn’t heard the actual term and thought Craig was actually asking if he ever had any *young boys* rather than youngboys? It’s the only explanation for the strange exchange. No one talked for a while.

Then Craig did. “You know because the Japanese guys had them.”

Bruno looks up furrowing his brow, confused. “The what? What was that?”

“Youngboys.”

Bruno shakes his head and eats. I’m smiling at Craig. *Done yet?* He was.

We finished the dinner and headed back to the hotel to await Harley, who was due in town about now. We returned to news that his flight from Kansas City was delayed. Bruno was going to head to his room and I agreed to call him when Harley got in. I’d sit in the lobby of the wrestlers’ hotel, awash with fans seeking pictures and autographs. There were the usual wayward promoters waiting for their drivers to bring them their talent from the airports, to be whisked away to signs stacks of items, and be put to bed for tomorrow’s wrestling convention down the road. It was a scene. I would sit on a couch in my suit watching the amalgamation of fringe personalities. I sat feigning disinterest but wondering if I was watching it, or I was part of it.

Well the delays mounted and now he was due in after 11:00 p.m. By the time he landed in Philly and got up here we wouldn’t be rolling until after midnight. The talent would be tired, we would be tired.

Around this time Sal the Stockbroker from the Stern show passes by in the lobby on the way to the restroom. I flagged him down and asked him if he and Richard Christy, also from the Stern show, got the DVDs I sent up. Richard was a big fan of old school wrestling. Sal said if we sent it, Richard probably got it. And away he went.

After 11 o’clock Bruno made his way into the lobby to find us. Well, to find me.

“What the heck is going on? It’s after eleven,” he said.

“I know Bruno I’m sorry he’s not here yet but truthfully he’s due in any second now.” It was true. Harley was in the car and on the way to the hotel.

“Jeez, I was sitting up there and nobody told me anything.” I apologized again and told Bruno to hang with me for a second so we could both greet Harley. We stood to the side in the crowded lobby. Bruno turned to a

promoter to chat and I walked away and started texting the driver to see what was up.

About this time, Sal the Stockbroker makes his way back from the bathroom. He slows down and his face goes white as a sheet. He saw something. Someone.

He sees me and darts over to me, the only somewhat familiar face in the lobby. He's beginning to pant, short of breath, and it isn't a work. That's "fake" in wrestling parlance. Sal's starting to freak.

"Dude, that's *Bruno Sammartino*," Sal says, as some might when recognizing the Dalai Lama or the Pope standing feet away.

"Sal, he's with me. You got a camera," I ask.

"Yeah I have my phone," he pulls it out. And he goes on. "You don't understand, I used to go to Nassau to see him with my dad and–"

"I do understand," I cut him off. "Bruno," I called to the Legend. "Come here a second." Sal was now a knock-kneed 16 year-old girl watching Elvis approach. "This is Sal from the Howard Stern radio show and he's a huge fan."

Bruno was as gracious as if I were introducing him to Prince Harry of Wales, and not a guy that shoves objects into his uncircumsized foreskin as lucky contestants guess *"What's in the Pouch?"* Sal is telling Bruno that he is his idol, having gone to so many matches in New York with his dad and the blah-blah that Bruno has gotten for years and years from every guy in the tri-state area with a vowel at the end of his name. I snap a picture for Sal and he's on his way. And just in time, here comes Harley.

Harley and his wonderful wife B.J. entered the lobby and were brought over to me. Bruno came over and we headed toward the suite where we would be shooting. B.J. indicated Harley needed to eat something as they'd been delayed for quite some time. It was an understandable inconvenience. B.J. phoned an order of chicken fingers into the hotel restaurant and I talked with Harley and Bruno about the crazy show we were about to attempt.

Harley sat beside B.J. across the room at a dining table awaiting the arrival of his dinner, while Bruno sat alone in a chair on the set. Harley pulled out a cigarette and lit up.

"Harley, you still smoking?!" Bruno asked incredulously.

Harley took a long, satisfying drag. He exhaled and looked over to Bruno with a smile.

"Yup."

That opening salvo began an illustration of two men on different poles. While Bruno and Harley shared the same space in my mind as the two quintessential statesmen of the sport, they could not be more opposite as people.

Bruno mentioned he was tired and he likely would have been asleep if home. Harley replied that he'd still be up watching the late night shows about now. They talked health. Bruno was an early riser, up at six, getting in a workout and a walk in the mornings. Harley got up when he got up. Harley was chomping down his fried chicken fingers as we they spoke, with Bruno having had his baked chicken and applesauce hours before.

When *The Great Debate '08* was released we added an online gimmick where you could cast your vote for the man who won you over in the debate. That year would see two elections as the United States chose a president and wrestling fans chose Bruno, who won the vote by only about 1%. My internal debate was whether or not the headline I had my heart set on to announce the result would be seen as tasteless. Poor taste *and* unfunny would be a 'fail.' Poor taste but funny is justifiable in the minds of all, who laugh while shaking the head disapprovingly. But laugh.

BRUNO WINS BY A NOSE!

Yes. We did it.

. . .

The perception of KC was changing in the market. The fans who found us when we were message board dwellers who put out a couple of cool videos with bookers, were becoming justified in their early public praise of us. Their hometown boys were becoming noticed and, by proxy, the early adopters were too. The passionate emails we started getting were beyond someone telling us that they liked a show we did. We had connected at a very deep level, and they were thrilled with all the new concepts we were trying.

Talent and their representatives began reaching out to us. People wanted to work with us. We landed Jerry Jarrett for a *Guest Booker* and that was a huge deal for me. The legendary Memphis territory was all Jarrett and partner Jerry Lawler. I was thrilled to be able to chronicle his philosophies on the series that I began to realize would be a collection that could go

down in wrestling history as a legit masters class, of sorts. I know first-hand that wrestling schools use the *Guest Booker* series for student viewing.

Jarrett was doing a shoot before us with another company at a Holiday Inn in New Jersey. I could not get a sufficient sized suite at that hotel for the kind of shoots we produce, so I found a location off-site. We would meet Jarrett in the hotel bar/restaurant with the convention promoters and the other video guys. It was a shitty, plastic cup, jukebox, and pool table kind of place. Jesus, there's Jerry sitting waiting for a cheeseburger, wearing a nice sports coat. He's surrounded by the unshaven, T-shirt-and-jeans mafia that run these events. I'm shaking my head. Jerry–fucking–Jarrett lands in an episode of *Beavis and Butthead.* It was like a hostage situation.

I'm wearing a suit as well, and maybe dress alone might form a bond between Jerry and I, positioning me beyond the fray that surrounds us. I sit across from Jerry and introduce myself and my crew. I tell him we will be stealing him as soon as we take the last bite of food. We make small talk over obnoxiously loud music. The food seems like it takes forever.

We grab Jerry and shoot over to the other hotel, ten minutes down Route 46. We were already set up and ready to roll, having arrived earlier in the day. Returning to the hotel now, it had quite a nice nighttime scene. The lobby had a proper bar/lounge, top shelf items, and plush couches placed about. There was even a huge, black grand piano being played in the center of the lobby. I had noticed none of this earlier as we checked in and lugged cases of equipment to the suite. But this was a nice scene greeting us and our very important guest.

I was about five paces ahead of Jerry and the guys when I heard him quietly say to himself, "Well, I see who the class operation is up here." I glowed inside. Something so simple as atmosphere can set a tone. In our cases of equipment there is always a spray bottle with a nice scent. Walking onto our set should be a pleasant experience for all senses. Everything matters.

The show was fine. There is one moment of note that was "caught" on-camera. Jerry just had a very public split with his son Jeff over a company they had called TNA Wrestling. There was not much being said publicly by either, but the wrestling news was having a field day reporting that the father and son had parted ways, both in business and in real life, over this creative difference. Off-camera, during a break, Jerry and I broached the subject which was the big, fat elephant in the room.

On-camera we talked about his booking philosophy and the territories he worked. How could the turbulent end of his TNA venture *not* be discussed? Was I just a schlock, shoot interview producer who wanted him to shoot on his own son? I hoped not. I just felt an incompleteness was at hand.

"Jerry," I said, as the crew set up the next segment. "It may be a painful thing right now, but is there anything you want to say about you and Jeff?"

He rubbed his chin and stared off, thoughtful. He wasn't giving any indication either way. He was thinking. Maybe he was weighing the implications it would have for his family. It had to be so painful. He was making a very careful choice.

No. He was booking.

"Why don't we do it like this," he started in his carefully paced, words-well-chosen way. "Why don't we make this an outtake. Like during a break like this. We can be just talking while the camera rolls, but the crew is working. That way the fans feel like they get something special. And you don't look like you're going for the dirt."

In about ten seconds of thinking, Jerry Jarrett had found a way for us to ask about the split with Jeff without our looking like muckrakers. He had found a way for him to say he loved Jeff and he was his son before anything else, without it looking like he was making a statement to the press. He had found a way for viewers to feel like they got an inside scoop. It was not lost on me that the legendary Jerry Jarrett chose to give that exclusive to Kayfabe Commentaries. He knew it would be in good hands.

When it's in the blood, it's in the blood.

I said fine. I told Jerry we would film a "break" in shooting, wherein Jerry asks for a drink. I'll turn to him and ask him if it was too difficult to talk about TNA and Jeff. He can take it from there.

I did wrestle with the work we were doing on the fans. Our whole programming promise was to take fans inside a business that was, in truth, fakery. Were we being dishonest by staging something? We'd shoot it, and I could decide in the edit.

Ultimately, I decided it was okay. Though the setup was a work, Jerry's comments about Jeff and TNA, the entire purpose of the segment, were from the heart. We still served our dish.

As we gained momentum we decided it was time to put the pedal to the metal and launch another series. We had an edition of *Ringside* with Demolition in the can already, but we held out for another name to launch

the series. We chose to go with Vader, a mainstay heel attraction in WCW, WWE, and Japan. The *Ringside* format, me and the guest watching their benchmark matches in real-time on the announcer's table monitor, required guests with an impressive and varied list of matches. Vader certainly fit the bill, having worked in both of the major U.S. federations. We also had the opportunity to cover his work in Japan and the night in Germany where Mick Foley lost part of his ear while in the ring with him.

We sat down to shoot what would become the pilot edition of *Ringside* with Vader, Leon White. Leon is a big guy who had a reputation in the business as being difficult. While we never found outright disrespect to be the case, there were moments that were odd.

As we'd originally designed the show, there were no formal introductions, or "opens," to the episodes in the *Ringside* series. After the opening credits, we would jump into the first match. As cameras rolled I introduced the match and date, and jumped right into asking Leon questions. He was thrown by the absence of a formal opening. He looked up at Anthony behind the cameras.

"Hold up," he said. "Guys, let's stop."

He turned to me. "I was expecting you to say, 'ladies and gentlemen this is Vader. Thank you for being here.'" He wanted a proper introduction. I don't know why he couldn't just look down at the monitor and talk about wrestling Bruiser Brody without one, but goddamn it, he couldn't.

"We planned to just jump into the match," I explained. This was boggling his mind and would throw his performance off.

"Well, I just want you to thank me for being here so we can have some talk between us." He was very clear. I certainly wasn't going to argue. Hell, maybe some brilliant banter awaited me. There might be a compelling opening to the show that Leon had in mind.

Take two. Contrary to my plans for the opening, I address the camera, do a formal introduction, and then turn to Leon for what would be, no doubt, some great banter.

"Leon, thank you for doing this," I say. Well, now the floor is his, as he'd requested. I stay silent, ready for him to take this in the direction he had in mind. I was actually curious to see what he was unable to start the show without addressing. He turned to me with a hint of a smile.

"My pleasure, my man. My pleasure." He patted me on the shoulder and looked down at the monitor. That was it. I waited for more. There wasn't

any. He's watching the monitor, and I'm watching him. What the fuck?

I was the one befuddled now. I'm sure if you watch the opening now you can sense the confusion. What the hell was that all about? It didn't much matter. We were off and running.

After covering a few matches, Leon began to get tired and uncomfortable. He asked for a break, which we happily obliged. Leon had a bad back after years of performing high-risk moves with his massive 375 lb. frame. He needed to do some stretches after sitting for an hour or so. We bullshitted for a bit and Leon coined two of the most memorable phrases we'd ever heard when discussing the large, steaming Vader mask. He indicated the steam blast was controlled by a "mechanical mechanism." I asked what was inside that made the steam.

"A liquid fluid." Naturally.

Leon stretched some more but he was getting very tired. He talked about this new 5-Hour Energy drink that gave a blast of renewed energy that lasted, well, for five hours. He swore by it and had some down the hall in his room. He asked if he could run down and drink a shot. He did.

He came back into the suite reinvigorated. He was energized for sure, moving swiftly, his voice louder and more clear. He seemed like someone plugged him in.

"Let's roll!" I sat down beside him and Anthony gave us the "go." I began to introduce the next match and Leon pipes up, practically breaking out into song.

"It's time, it's time, it's Vader time!" He was juiced on his 5-Hour Energy gimmick and the big guy was on fire! "Right here on Ringside, with my host Sean Oliver!" I was thrilled to see the uptempo pace he was ready to ride for the next 4 hours and 59 minutes.

Except it didn't last beyond one match we were covering. Within 20 minutes Leon was slowing down, turning off. This big locomotive was grinding to a halt. Either the clock on that 5-Hour deal was divided by your body weight or he accidently grabbed 5-*Minute* Energy. He was plummeting to the earth and landing with a thud on our pilot show.

When we broke between matches I turned to him and asked what happened with the 5-Hour Energy.

"Didn't work," he forfeited.

5. Birth of a Franchise

I was the picture of insomnia, sitting in the dark in my dining room, well after midnight. Fortunately I was being kept company by “Superstar” Billy Graham. Well, digitally, anyway. I was listening to a competitor’s shoot interview with “Superstar.” Billy is an incredibly engaging speaker who was a major figure in the WWE, holding the heavyweight title after unseating the “Living Legend” Bruno Sammartino. So it was all the more troubling when the interview’s section covering the title switch from Bruno to Billy lasted less than five minutes. It may have even been less than two. I was incredulous that anyone could allow the topic of conversation to jump away from anything so important, so quickly. Jesus, didn’t they want to dig through all those wonderfully kayfabed details of a title change in the late 70s?

I sat there very confident that I could spend at least an hour on the saga surrounding his winning the WWE World Heavyweight title. I was listening as a fan, thirsting for more info about this fascinating era. But these traditional shoot interviews spend a couple of hours on the talent’s entire career, spanning years and years. There just isn’t enough time to go as in depth as I’d enjoy listening to. In others’ failure lies opportunity.

For years I’d longed for a massive book about the real history of the WWE, wrestling’s largest federation. Would there ever be a way to retell the company’s story? Lord knows they wouldn’t be able to do it themselves

in a WWE book. There are far too many landmines that the now publicly traded WWE would have to navigate in telling the story. I had no interest in a whitewashed, authorized reimagining of reality. Compelling are the triumphs and rewards, but equally captivating are the scandals and missteps. You need the whole picture in telling the story of an entity and its people, and the uglier chapters would certainly be omitted by the WWE for fear of tainting its image from shareholders unaware of a ring announcer's troubling fondness for underage feet.

At an intersection of these two thoughts lay the concept of our series *Timeline: The History of WWE*. What if we wrote that book but did it on video, told by the various talent that were there. We would dedicate each "chapter" to one year, from January through December, and each year would be told by a top player who was there. The story would be told in the first person, with firsthand experiences. No historians allowed.

My vision was to provide an open-ended, historical retelling of the company's story, with the viewer's DVD shelf eventually spanning the forty or fifty years/editions of the show. Slowly the gaps on that shelf would be filling in, with the viewer's collection impressively spanning all the years chronologically, as listed on the spines of the DVDs.

This was ambitious. Anthony would have to research each edition to death to ensure we omit no important detail from the year we were covering. The shooting scripts that would hit my inbox days before the shows would range in page count from 50 to 80 pages or so. Beyond our own sales goals, I felt this was an important project for history's sake. We had to be thorough.

I also wanted to retain elements of the "book" theme. We would develop a graphic wherein each new topic is written on the screen, and then we would fade into the talent commenting on said event. I wanted it to seem as if we read a paragraph of the book, then the star materializes and takes us beyond just the written facts.

The early editions of the show had graphics where a literal timeline would appear, with callout boxes that would pop up near the date being referenced. As we were developing multiple series now, we would have to find ways to differentiate shows from each other. We would need distinguishing elements and setups that would create uniformity for each series. All the *Timeline: History of WWEs* would not only have to appear uniform, we would need to find ways to make that series different from our

others. *YouShoots* would have to look and sound like *YouShoots. Ringsides* would have to look and sound like *Ringsides* and *Timelines* would have to be stylistically consistent with the other *Timeline* episodes.

The first edition of the *Timeline* series that we actually shot was *1983 with Magnificent Don Muraco*. The opportunity presented itself to get Muraco, and as a former Intercontinental champion in the early 80s, he was a must. But similar to the *Ringside* series, the first show we shot wouldn't be the best with which to pilot the series, as we thought Muraco would be too much of a gamble. Don did not appear on many shoot DVDs so his marketability was unknown and with a new series you need a little extra push. Plus, the era he was covering may have been a bit before the days of many Internet wrestling community dwellers.

There are questions that arise and decisions that have to be made when a new series gets off the ground. I remember standing on-set for the first *Timeline* shoot and I hadn't yet been able to find the visually distinguishing elements for the show. The *format* of the series came rather quickly and I knew what I had to accomplish as host. I was prepared to unearth the minutiae that would make the series so precious to fans. As a matter of fact, to this day when I prep the talent I tell them that the one detail they feel may be insignificant or trivial, like a last second conversation before heading to the ring or the like, is actually gold for the wrestling fan. They should, by all means, tell those details. Those nuggets that the talent may feel were boring, like standard, wrestling, locker room conversation, are actually what we eat up. We know what happened in the match. But we don't know what *almost* happened that night but *didn't.*

But the visual setup of the show was unclear to me. All of our shows were visually distinguishable. *Guest Booker* used a large dry erase board beside the guest and I. *YouShoot* had me and the guest sitting before a laptop while a lower third of questions or videos would pop up on the screen. *Ringside* saw us at the large announcer's table. What would be the visual hook for *Timeline: The History of WWE?*

I first addressed the seating arrangement. I thought that since all of our prior shows had the talent and I sitting in separate chairs beside one another, we would use a couch for these. I began to light a long couch that Don and I would share.

What a mistake. This couch setup lasted two shoots and we quickly reverted back to two separate chairs. Watching Muraco and me seated at

opposite ends of the couch as his short-shorts nearly sprouted his ball sack on-camera made this look like a game of “gay chicken.” There was no reason for this decision to shoot on the couch other than differentiation and there was already plenty of differentiation in the show’s format, with the graphics and such. It also made for a flat, linear set. This edition and the next one we shot, *2000 with Rikishi*, were the only two that featured the couches.

Color was another choice I had to make. *YouShoot* featured red accent lighting. *Guest Booker* was varied. *Ringside* used those hot whites from the hard angle. *My Side of the Story* was a soft amber glow, kind of like a fireside chat, real intimate. I asked the crew aloud (to my great chagrin later), “What is the color of memory?”

On its surface maybe it’s a pretentious or flat-out ridiculous question, and believe me it outlived that day for the ballbusting enjoyment of the guys at KC. As I was lighting that first *Timeline* shoot, I was just pondering in what shades we, as people, color our distant recall. I initially felt that it lived in a warm color. I lit the set in an amber backlight with regular soft, white key light.

Then after looking at it and putting Craig in Muraco’s spot as a stand-in, I knew it was wrong. I think the amber was getting lost in the warm couch and Lord knows we had plenty of empty couch between Don and I in the master shot. So I went in the total opposite direction and chose a cool, smoky blue. That worked and would become part of the theme color for the advertising and packaging for the series, blue and yellow.

The first run of shows had that design—cool blue backlight, strong, white key light, and blue accent light in the background. Somewhere along the line I started to light the series darker. It was intentional, despite what film school trolls—excuse me—*video* school trolls post beneath those trailers on YouTube. I was going after a feeling, a vibe. I was going after late night discussion, secrets being told. You’ll see this lighting decision in editions with George Steele, Brutus Beefcake, Fit Finlay, Sean Morley, and probably a couple of others. There was a stretch of shows where I tried to create that. Ultimately I decided to go back to a more traditional, neutral, TV show lighting. I’m not sure why. If it was because I caved to the criticism of an ambition-free basement dweller who wouldn’t pay for our content anyway, then we should go back to it.

As I mentioned earlier, Rikishi was our second shoot. This wouldn't be a launch title either. We would put this in the can so we could grab a more contemporary year in history, as Rikishi was covering 2000. We now had 1983 and 2000 completed, albeit with me and the talent doing our best first-date poses on the sofa. But the show format was proving to be successful. We would allow the talent to take us back in time and intensely examine, with laser focus, one year each. We were certainly finding, through the research, that there was enough material in one year of WWE to cover a whole two-hour show. I was hosting and, by doing so, ensuring the guests spent the requisite time on all the details, leading the show where it needed to go.

While we were shooting Muraco and Rikishi for later release, we knew who we wanted to launch the new series. With the success of *YouShoot* it seemed a good omen to keep The Honky Tonk Man in that pilot episode slot moving forward with *Timeline: The History of WWE*. Honky Tonk was the longest running Intercontinental champ for the WWE, so from a historical standpoint his participation in that series was more than justified. Add to that the fact that he was a darling of the shoot interview world, always bristling about something and not afraid to step on a toe or two, and we had a natural choice to launch the new series and establish that our anthology would be rooted in honesty.

Honky's edition became *Timeline: The History of WWE #001*. From the get-go the series was well received, but we didn't yet know how influential this format would become in the shoot industry and podcast world. We would set the course for the pro wrestling aftermarket and show them the way to ignite the endless passion and thirst for knowledge on the part of the fans. But first, we had to get a bunch of new *Timelines* in the can.

. . .

A wrestler's dramatic entrance can be a memorable and effective moment for fans. The live audience feasting their eyes on a charismatic warrior in person is powerful. Superstar Billy Graham was unquestionably one of the most charismatic men ever to step into a ring. And his entrance was certainly memorable to us all.

I am talking about his entrance into our suite.

Landing Superstar Graham for the new *Timeline* series was big. Remember, he was the impetus for the series when I heard him on another company's interview while sitting in my drawers at the dining room table. Now I'd have the opportunity to spend all the time I could getting inside the most important year in this legend's career. There are a few people that I considered benchmark guests for the series and Billy was one of them. He was engaging and descriptive. I was ready for him. I would take him by the hand and lead this show to the promised land.

We had never worked with Billy before. There's a great deal of trust involved with the kind of programming we produce. I want the talent to know they are safe with me. I don't want them guarded because you can't create compelling interview programming with someone speaking from a place of caution. I think I have a way of removing defenses. I will allow myself that compliment and it's important. You can ask talent who have worked with us. The rapport that I can usually establish with a guest is the secret ingredient. Doesn't always work, though. Some days are rough and I work like hell to bring a guest out of their shell.

If we already know a guest from having worked with them before, then my job is easier. The mystery is taken from the equation. They wouldn't have been invited back if I didn't think we had a rapport. When we haven't worked with someone it's a question mark. Our reputation in the business is pretty solid so nowadays even talent we don't know come in the doors knowing we are the real deal. We are safe and we are professional. No one has left our shows looking bad, or at least worse than they did beforehand. But back in the day we had no idea what their perceptions of us were.

Like I mentioned, dinner is a great icebreaker but it's not always an option. There are times when the talent and/or their handler are simply given the room number and they are just delivered to us, cold. So that puts a huge spotlight on "the entrance." Walking straight onto a hot set and meeting the host and crew for the first time is not the best situation for softening up a guest. Sure, we'll talk before we roll. We will sign the release. I will give a pitch and some instructions or pointers for that show. But it's not the type of conversation to engender that trust.

Such an uncertain greeting was to be the case with Superstar Billy Graham. We were set up for the shoot and we just got word he was on his way up. With everything set, all we could do was wait.

Man, that's an uncomfortable few minutes. In a way, it's like awaiting judgment on your fate. Would an amiable, eager face enter the room? Would a cranky, jaded asshole walk in? Are you hereby sentenced to two hours of difficulty? Or are you set for a great production? This is the thought process while awaiting the knock on the door.

The agent/manager/promoter who brought in the talent can factor into this equation. If you are working through a middleman and not talking with the talent directly, that go-between can be of great assistance. Maybe they vouched for you. Maybe they communicated the concept of the show in great detail so the talent knows what's to come. You'd think that was a given, right?

Super Agent Eric Simms is very reliable, very fastidious with travel details and arrangements. He's probably the hardest working guy in that line of work. But Eric is filled with quirks that can drive you mad. As his talent continued to walk in our doors with no clue about what we were doing, I expressed great frustration to him.

Eric, in an attempt at defending himself, actually said, "I try and tell my talent as *little as possible* about what they're doing!" Thanks for helping, big guy.

Eric had nothing to do with the Superstar Graham booking so we wouldn't be seeing him or experiencing his gift of zero talent prep.

Waiting. Sitting on the empty set. Is that boom mic centered?

Anthony fidgets. The crew waits.

What fate will the entrance foretell?

At last, the door to the suite opens and in walks nothing short of a circus. The legendary Superstar Billy Graham walks in with an entourage of four or five people, each performing a different task. In that two or three second evaluation period wherein the mind and spirit render verdict on whether a situation is good or bad, the red light begins to flash *danger.* Okay, *horror!*

Someone is holding an electric box fan. Bob the photographer is here snapping away. Billy's agent for the day, the late Scott Epstein, is there with folders, paperwork, and a bunch of publicity photos. There is a female bodybuilder, Jamie D, there as well. I checked the doorway for the bearded lady.

And Billy was there. Billy was hobbling, audibly wailing in pain as he walked, his every step a chore. He is helped to the empty guest chair as his head is being wiped down by one of his people carrying a large towel. The

sounds coming from Billy as he bent to sit sounded like he was being murdered from the inside. The fan person drags a chair over beside Billy, puts the box fan on it, plugs it in and fires it up. It blasts on him, me, the set, my script.

Everything that is happening here is production repellent. Billy is in no condition to speak right now. How the fan *directly* beside Billy was thought to be acceptable in a shot is beyond me. Some time was taken to bring this whole scene down to earth. I made sure Billy was okay, first and foremost. He began to ease into the situation. I told him we could take as many breaks as he would like if his hip required it. He said he would be fine.

"It's standing that's the problem, I'm fine now," Billy said. "Sitting is where I excel."

"Me too, Billy," big Craig calls from across the room.

Order is slowly being restored. The box fan has been struck from the set as I explained to his team what I thought to be something very basic about audio. Billy's posse has settled into seats around the room. Billy is calm. We are ready to shoot.

Other than the four people, box fan, publicity photos, and towel, Billy also brought something else into the shoot. I didn't know until we rolled camera. I gave the show's intro and jumped back to 1977 with my first question and Billy began what seemed like a prepared diatribe about some things he wanted to get on video. From Jesse Ventura to Hulk Hogan, Billy went through the influences he's had on all the biggest names in the business. At a certain point it became clear I wouldn't be able to steer this back on course. So I just let him roll. How long could it go on?

The answer is twenty minutes. When he was finished, he kinda made that known, and we started the real show. It was all getting chopped in editing anyway. It wasn't a total loss though, as we used this as "bonus footage" for the special Signature Edition DVD.

Superstar Graham's entrance was disheartening to say the least, but he's in good company. Early on a happy Saturday morning, we awaited the arrival of Brutus Beefcake to cover the year 1989 for *Timeline: The History of WWE*. This was to be a very early shoot, so we set up the suite the night before and all headed back home to be ready for the next morning. Someone who clearly did not head back early the night before to be ready for the morning shoot?

Brutus Beefcake.

This shoot was an Eric Simms deluxe. Yeah, we didn't just order the regular burger. We got the full fixins on this deal.

Firstly, to his credit, Eric had his talent to the suite at 8:00 a.m. as prescribed. I know this because I saw the door open and watched Brutus walk in, look at the full video production set through bloodshot eyes, utter a "whoa," and turn around and walk out.

Our guest just walked in, clearly ambushed, then turned and walked away. I actually felt a 300 lb. burden dropped on my shoulders. This will be an interesting show, if we even have one. I don't have a guest. I have a Super Agent and, believe me, he would have been more than happy to sit in and be interviewed while Brutus wandered Route 1&9 in Newark. But, seeing as we have to garner more viewers than just Grandma Simms, I need Brutus back.

The good news was that it was easy to track him down I know that, because he is standing in the hallway of this large, chain hotel and screaming at his wife on the phone. Yup, full-out goin' at it. My optimism for putting a great show in the can is waning like a hard-on at Sunday mass. Eric is shrugging a lot, saying Brutus was at the bar 'til late last night. I know Eric is correct about that as well. Know how I know? Because Brutus is now yelling that into the phone. *"I swear I was at the bar with the guys!!!"* Does Jimmy Fallon deal with this? Jimmy Kimmel?

Eventually Brutus comes in after Eric enters and exits the room a few times. Brutus sits beside me and breathes last night's bar on me. This guy looked like shit, sounded like shit, and must've felt like shit. And by all indications, that's what this edition of our show would end up being. Shit.

I was wrong. In the most earnest testament to the aforementioned performer's gene I've ever seen, Brutus flipped that switch when the cameras rolled. It was remarkable. Wrestlers of yesteryear did this all the time. They did 250 dates a year and the bars often followed the arenas. The performer's gene is something to behold and Brutus has it in a big way.

. . .

Timeline: The History of WWE was allowing me to use legends of the sport that did not fit into the narrow confines of the prerequisites for *Guest Booker* and *YouShoot.* Anyone hired for those two shows would have to

have been a booker or a controversial figure, respectively. Now legends like Superstar Graham had a spot on KC programming.

Larry Zbyszko is a great example of that. I don't know what show would have worked for a guy like Larry except *Timeline.* Larry was in the hottest feud of 1980 in the WWE with Bruno Sammartino and, based on his turning on the federation's hero, became one of the hottest heels there for some time. It was a no-brainer that we'd want Larry for the 1980 edition of the series. He had great recall and was one of those X-factor guys– charismatic and entertaining. He was an engaging storyteller and would shine in the *Timeline* format with me dangling the carrot.

Larry is a real character outside of the ring also, as you're probably learning most of the guys from that era were. Larry is a worker through and through. He is responsible for the most brilliant request for an advance on his pay that I'd ever experienced.

We really don't do advances on workers' pay. (Except for Konnan. But more on that later.) We just generally don't do it, and not because they're thieves or we are distrusting of talent. (Except for Konnan. But more on that later.) There are simply so many variables to some of these bookings that if they fall apart for whatever reason, everyone can walk away with minimal inconvenience.

After a few emails back and forth with Larry Zbyszko to go over the details of the booking, he gives me a call about two weeks before the shoot. After some small talk that guarantees me a detailed and insightful show about WWE in the year 1980, Larry says the following:

"Listen Sean, something's going on with my teeth."

"What's that, Larry?" I asked.

"Well, they're chipping and I'm spitting pieces of teeth out all over the place. Getting old sucks, man. My damn teeth are falling apart. I really want to get some new ones before your shoot, I don't want my teeth falling out for your show–"

Brilliant. It's now up to me to save my show. His teeth are now *my* problem. Surely I'd pay to save our show!

"I was wondering if you could send me a few bucks to get them fixed." Bam, right there.

Well wouldn't *you?* It was an advance on what we would be paying anyway. Still, you have to admire Larry's booking of his advance.

Larry showed up with a beautiful mouthful of teeth and he was phenomenal in the show. I was happy to help both he and his dentist.

I mentioned earlier that we had benchmark names that had to be a part of this series, like Zbyszko. Ultimately though, if we couldn't come to terms with someone we'd have to move on. Negotiations are fairly simple for me and if the price doesn't work, it doesn't work. Period. Then there are times a talent just doesn't want to do a shoot interview. That term, shoot interview, has a negative connotation for some and I wish more talent would see that the shoot interview subgenre has a lot of different gradients.

One of the names I considered a must-have was "Rowdy" Roddy Piper. Piper was *the heel* that helped make Hulk Hogan and the WWE's boom period in the mid 80s. When we locked him in to cover 1984 for *Timeline: The History of WWE* I was excited. This year was the biggie, as far as I was concerned. 1984 set the stage for a lineage of things to come, not the least of which was the first *Wrestlemania.* Piper was integral in selling that landmark show.

For total disclosure I should admit that it cannot be overstated how much of a Piper mark I was as a kid. I was Piper for Halloween in 6th grade, but I was Piper for my *childhood,* much to my parents' dismay. Couldn't I have looked up to Terry Bradshaw? G.I. Joe? O.J. Simpson?

No way. I had never seen anyone use their mouth to move so many people. Sure, they wanted to strangle him, but what a visceral reaction. It was a gift. It meant being noticed, though hated. It meant mattering to people. That's heavy shit for a kid looking to be noticed.

Roddy was quite the performer in our interview setting as well. His dramatic pauses and keen, instinctual identification of "moments" is second to none. It's why Roddy was captivating in the ring, in the promo, in Hollywood, and on *Timeline: The History of WWE.* For over three hours, Roddy went right with me through everything and anything I brought up. It was one of those times I wasn't hosting. I was chatting. The script and the clock were almost inconsequential. I was getting the straight dish (kind of) from Hot Rod. I say "kind of" because Roddy always blurred reality a bit. But I was certain I was getting the truth about everything I wanted. Plus, I didn't know if Roddy was intentionally exaggerating details. It's quite possible that everything Roddy told me is exactly as he remembered it.

We talked for over three hours and covered this landmark year, and yet the one thing that has outlived the importance of that entire show is a single,

murky revelation about Pat Paterson and a young Roddy at the Olympic Auditorium. The implication was big and that moment got noticed all over the place, particularly in a large building in Stamford, Connecticut.

We didn't go to any lengths to hide it. As a matter of fact, part of it was in the official trailer. Roddy's revelation was significant and it was undoubtedly a selling point for the show. It was intriguing and moved Roddy a great deal while discussing it. But he stopped short of being explicit.

Was it true? Was it irresponsible to put this in the show? No, I didn't think so.

Actually, was *what* irresponsible to put in the show? The only concrete statements about the situation with Pat that came from Roddy's mouth were that he was a "pretty kid" at one time, he might have "did something" to Pat, and it was "awkward." All this was an outgrowth of my asking about Pat as a booker and Roddy offering that Pat didn't like him. When I asked why, Piper had this confessional moment.

While those are the only incriminating statements made in that part of the interview, it's something Roddy said later that was more telling. Roddy patted my leg at one point later on and jokingly asked what I was doing later.

"Not working the Olympic Auditorium in 1972, that's for sure," I replied.

Roddy laughed and said "And I brought kneepads...who knew he'd become the boss!" Do the work on your own.

The word I got was that the WWE was angry at Roddy after this moment on our show. I have no idea if they did any due diligence to find out if anything actually happened to Roddy while he was a young wrestler that may have so scarred him. I just know his mouth was a threat to their publicly traded empire. Pun intended.

Any anger directed at Roddy pissed me off. Roddy did not point a finger into the camera and spell out specific charges at Pat, like some other folks did circa 1992. Roddy actually assumed blame, painting himself like he did something stupid as a kid. I'm not sure that's necessarily the healthiest thing to do either, but to be mad at him for having a moment while exploring a painful memory is bullshit and a selfish stance.

Moments like this are confirmation that historical retellings by WWE Network, and any other shareholder-approved outlets wherein truth is secondary to liability, will never be able to compete with ours.

Having said all that, I'm not sure about Roddy's recollection being true, or at least having occurred as he stated. The timeline is weird, as I'm not sure they crossed paths in L.A., as Pat spent most of his time in San Francisco for promoter Roy Shire. I don't know Roddy to have worked San Francisco. But who the hell am I to argue? I can say one thing, details to be debated perhaps–Roddy felt what he was saying. Something went down between he and Pat. Who knows what?

In the WWE-produced show *Legend's House*, which aired after our interview with Roddy but was taped beforehand, both he and Pat had to share a house with some other wrestling talent. I kept a keen eye on Roddy's and Pat's interaction on that reality show when it aired. He and Pat barely interacted with each other on-camera.

A couple of years after our work together, on July 31, 2015, the world lost the greatest wrestling heel ever to hold a microphone. Roddy Piper had a heart attack in his sleep and shocked the wrestling world for the very last time.

. . .

For all the wackiness I'm discussing, I'd be remiss if I didn't spotlight the single most honorable act we'd encountered, by the single most honorable man I ever met in wrestling.

We had occasion to work with Bruno Sammartino one time after *The Great Debate '08* for our *Timeline: The History of WWE* series. That series would have a gaping and inexcusable hole if the greatest WWE champion ever were not a part of it. We had Bruno cover 1963-1969 for the series, since he held the WWE heavyweight title for that entire span. Collectively, he would hold that belt for almost 12 years. Bruno was a must. And it wasn't an easy road.

In 2012 we booked Bruno to appear on the show. He would come into New Jersey, make an appearance at the *Legends of the Ring* convention, and when he was done with his signing he would have about two and a half hours to knock out our show before he had to be whisked back to Pittsburgh.

This would be a monumental appearance for our show so we wanted to add some special touches. We commissioned Shanghai-born sports artist Enyou to do a series of original paintings and lithographs of Bruno. For

special names that we work with, we do offer limited, autographed DVD runs called Signature Editions. For Bruno I wanted something much more significant than our regular Signature Edition. For this show, fans would be able to order the original paintings, each signed by Bruno, with a unique phrase written on it, for $999 with the DVD. One step below that package we offered autographed lithograph prints with the DVD for $99. We would make this special.

All the plans were put in place. Enyou's work was coming along beautifully, with each of his original works having unique elements to distinguish from one another. One panting was accented with current WWE colors of red and black, another one with the red, white, and green for Italy's flag. Another one was painted with the original belt. Each had Bruno in the same pose, with some varied details. They're beautiful. We still have a few originals. Buy one!

Anthony had to write a show that would cover 1963-1969 and feel complete, yet not rushed. We had to nail it in about two hours, as we'd need the other half hour for Bruno to meet Enyou in person, take some pictures as he presented Bruno with a framed original. Then Bruno would have to sign the 12 original pieces and 88 prints. We'd need every bit of those two and a half hours. Above all, though, we needed a show, and a great one. We were crafting a very special edition of what was becoming our benchmark series. This was an event.

That event began to distort into a nightmare.

We were all set up and ready to go. The set was dressed, including a beautiful, framed Enyou original sitting on an easel between Bruno's and my seat. The artist was there and just unpacked all of the works into a conference room awaiting the Living Legend. Bruno was just down the hall signing for fans at the convention. His line for autographs was very long. These appearances are timed, though the stars sometimes elect to stay until every fan gets an autograph. Sometimes promoters have the stars sign longer than their appointed time. Whatever the case, on this day Bruno signed well over his time. Our window of time was closing and it was apparent we now didn't have the time we were promised.

When Bruno was finished signing for the convention fans, a handful of us convened in a large conference room. Bruno sat down next to his agent for the day, Scott Epstein. Scott is the man with whom I made this deal. He brokered Bruno for us. Also present were James and Terence, promoters of

the convention. Then there was a very pissed off me and an equally pissed off Anthony. Everyone in the room had a grievance and the tension was palpable. Anyone non-essential to the particulars of this deal were asked to leave, embarrassingly enough for me that included Enyou, who ventured here exclusively for this. I walked him to the door and had my crew take him down the hall to the set, where I told him there was no problem, I'd be right back.

So here's what we had … the *Legends of the Ring* convention, who got their signing and then some. Then there was Bruno and Scott, who got paid for the convention, but knew the other part of the deal, our video, was running out of time. Finally you had Kayfabe Commentaries who wrote a show, advertised the hell out of it, commissioned an artist, and were getting dick as far as a product that day. I don't know who spoke first, but I remember exactly what everyone said. There was Bruno, who was very direct.

"I agreed to be out here for X number of hours," he began. "For whatever reason, I signed more at the convention than I was told. I know you need more time for this video, but I am not changing my flight to a later time, it's already almost four, and if I am expected to stay out here another day it has to be worth my while." He looked at me.

There was a moment, however brief, that I wondered how many times Vincent J. McMahon had been in my shoes and heard that, looking straight into those same eyes that I was. It was, admittedly, a cool thought. I reached into my pocket to see if I had some loose change to jingle around, possibly conjuring up the spirit of the long-deceased promoter. That psychological edge may throw Bruno for a loop.

Here we were with our deal being blown and the unconscionable idea that we would pay more was being floated. That only bolstered my strength. No matter who you're talking to about the deal, the show is still your child. You have to defend it.

"We are the only party in this room that is leaving here today with absolutely *nothing,*" I said. "We will not pay a dime more than anything we agreed to because this delay was not our fault and, quite honestly, we are the victims here."

James offered Bruno more money for the extra time he signed at the convention. He declined. We were getting nowhere.

The agent on this deal, Scott Epstein, who I liked very much before that day, sat with his hands folded and said *nothing*. Not a goddamn word. There was no attempt to juggle the schedule. There was no acknowledgement that the deal I struck with him was getting fucked before our very eyes. After Bruno spoke, Scott shrugged, hands folded, and just stared at us and James and Terence. I was disappointed. There was no negotiator present. The clock was moving, he had a flight, and I wasn't paying any more. We would have to wrap this up. I'd use the hour or so we had left to have Bruno sign the paintings and meet Enyou.

Bruno offered to have us out to Pittsburgh to shoot at the house or even a TV studio that a friend of his owned. I shook his hand and just told him to commit to finding some time in the coming weeks for us. He agreed.

James from *Legends of the Ring* had become a friend and a business partner on more than once occasion. He was a straight shooter and all of our deals were verbal and we both know each other's words are solid. He is very unlike many in this business. I know for a fact that after we left the room James threw everyone else out and forced additional pay on Bruno for his time. James is honorable that way. Didn't help us, though.

Weeks passed and I was comfortable knowing I had Bruno's word on the show. It would now cost us the expense of moving a shoot out to Pittsburgh, but we needed this show. Sometimes you bite the bullet.

One day the bullet got very, very big. The WWE made an announcement that I actually knew was coming from back before I initially booked Bruno. The WWE would finally, after an embarrassingly inordinate amount of time, be inducting Bruno Sammartino into the Hall of Fame. Great news for us, right?

Not exactly. I knew that after this announcement was public, the WWE would begin restricting Bruno's appearances and clearing them all through their office. I imagined they'd let him appear at some conventions, but likely not appear on any taped programming. As I said, I knew this induction announcement was coming but I also knew they wouldn't be announcing it for some time. Triple H had gone to see Bruno and floated the idea. They had no formal agreement when I booked him, though Scott had indicated he was likely going to do it. Triple H's offer was sweet–the money was huge. I told Epstein I needed to jump the line and get this show. So we booked it.

To my mind, I had a couple of months to announce Bruno's appearance on *Timeline: The History of WWE*, get the paintings done, signed, and shoot our show. After that, they would make the Hall of Fame announcement and subsequently the value on our show and artwork, both completed, would rise.

This is why losing the shoot at that convention was so significant. The clock on the wall that day wasn't the only clock chasing me. There was a larger one that involved the Hall of Fame. I had Bruno's word he'd reschedule with us, but now there would be another party involved in Connecticut.

Some time later, just before the Hall of Fame, I saw Bruno would be out this way in Queens, NY. The agent bringing him out was Sal Corrente. I emailed Sal and explained that Bruno and I had plans for a video that extended back to a botched deal with Epstein, and I wanted to close the deal. He was reluctant, saying that the video was a deal with another agent, not him. Well, I was talking to *him* now, I explained. Epstein was probably still in the conference room with his hands folded.

I just couldn't get Sal on the same page as me. I was getting a lot of bullshit. He was just in the way. There are times you deal with people in business who are just in the way of anything getting done. You have to examine if there is really a blockage to deal with, or if this is a matter for that other promoter and their shrink. Maybe Sal was trying to protect the WWE deal, which he referenced in a few of the emails. Everyone could benefit from doing some business together here.

Suddenly, Sal emailed said he wanted a conference call with Bruno, him, and me. Bruno wanted to talk. I called in from the road, hoping to work something out. When I got Bruno on the line he told me about his trip to Connecticut last week. WWE had him go up to Titan Tower, the WWE's headquarters in Stamford. They were doing some paperwork for the deal and going over particulars. When they got to Bruno's restrictions, he spoke up.

"Sean," he told me, "I told them about the deal we had and that I absolutely owed these guys from New Jersey their video. They said they really preferred I didn't do it, but I told them I gave you my word."

I almost drove off the road.

Bruno exhibited an honor I'd never seen. How many desperate people in this business would sell their mother down the river for a big WWE payday

and a shot at more precious WWE TV time? Let alone risk it by telling the office they were honoring my handshake deal? I just recently had one guy not even call me back after agreeing on a project because they were putting him in the Hall of Fame. Bruno told the WWE office he was honoring an independent video company's handshake deal. Period.

Not to be outdone by a man's honor, that worm in Titan Tower asked Bruno how much we were paying, ostensibly to buy out the commitment. They didn't understand it wasn't about his payday. It was about the day he looked into my eyes and shook my hand. But Bruno is so shrewd. He saw through it all and realized the office dweeb likely had no idea about the handshake agreement days in the business in which they were working. He knew money was their all-consuming tool.

"So Sean, I told them you were paying me about double what you are, so that they dropped it," he said. "I just want you to know the number that I got them to leave me alone, if they approach you and ask."

Brilliant.

Bruno Sammartino walked into the Courtyard by Marriott at LaGuardia Airport and shot an episode of *Timeline: The History of WWE* that warms my heart to this day, for so many reasons. I was at his retirement match in 1981. He is the crown jewel of the company we have been documenting for 23 feature length editions, as of this writing. And he showed me that honor trumps all, at any cost.

When one hears talk about the WWE, it is spoken about as a singular, freestanding entity, like Godzilla or The Blob. We say, "the WWE told Bruno they preferred he didn't do our video." But it's individual people, or even a single person, who made that suggestion. It wasn't a large monster.

Take, for example, a WWE media librarian and *WWE Magazine* office worker in Stamford who we will call Ed. Ed won a contest in early 2009 that was run by a popular wrestling website, shortly after we launched *Timeline: The History of WWE*. We'd made an agreement with them to give away some *Guest Booker* DVDs to their readers. Ed was actually the contest winner one week, and we got the email from the website indicating where to ship the winner's DVD. It was going to 120 Hamilton Ave, Stamford Ct – WWE TV Production facility.

I sent Ed a personal email, saying that in addition to his *Guest Booker* DVD, we would also send him a copy of our series *Timeline: The History of WWE*. I thought, given his current employment, he might enjoy the series.

Ed indicated he and the guys there enjoyed our shows, and he inquired about coming down for an event we would be promoting called *Ring Roasts.* More on that to come.

We sent the *WWE Magazine* worker his DVDs on April 13, 2009. A few months later, *WWE Magazine* hits the newsstands with a special issue called “The History of WWE.” The magazine is a year-by-year snapshot of wrestlers and events throughout the WWE’s history. And guess what image runs through the center of the pages of the magazine? If you guessed “a timeline with callout boxes” you’d be correct.

I sent Ed the following email on September 21, 2009:

Ed,

So did your boss watch our "Timeline: The History of WWE" and blatantly say, "let's put out a magazine that mimics their show exactly?!"

I couldn't believe that issue. Unreal.

He never had the nerve to write me back. It was unique for us as we actually had occasion to put a name to the emulation of our product by The Blob. In my mind it fostered the concept that it was *people* behind the very conscious decision at WWE to watch us, learn from us, and attempt to put KC inspired material in their products.

6. Ring Roasts

In the spirit of “what’s old is new again,” the celebrity roast returned to the comedy forefront around 2008. From *The Dean Martin Roast* in years past to the Comedy Central roasts in modern times, the celebrity roast has been an opportunity to see stars and comedians of all styles skewer friends and foes alike, to the sadistic amusement of viewers. We sought to ride this wave and tap into the new trend. Wrestling fans are trendy, right?

Without hesitation we decided our old pal The Iron Sheik, with his recent resurgence in popularity on *The Howard Stern Show* and now on the road with comedian Reverend Bob Levy and his “Killers of Comedy,” would be the first honoree. There would be a live audience, food, drink, merriment, and wrestlers, wrestlers, wrestlers. Oh, and some comedians.

Sheiky-Baby is a real-life character beyond even the typical uniqueness of the average wrestler of yesteryear. Yes, these cats were different than the Joe Average. They lived a life on the fringe in a business that was on the map located between the old west and the circus big top. The lifestyle bred a brotherhood of wayward souls with a distorted rulebook pertaining to a world equally foreign to us.

But The Iron Sheik, real name Kozrow Vaziri, or Koz to those close to him, was a collection of eccentricities, expressions, and behaviors that truly made him a caricature of flesh and blood. There is no one alive that doesn’t love him. Though, let it be known, Koz can certainly test those very close to

him. The Sheik's habits were taxing to family and also to his long-time manager Eric Simms. Daily life with Koz is no picnic.

The hell with all that, I didn't have to deal with it. I absolutely loved spending time with the good-hearted Iranian. I most loved winding him up about how much Eric Simms was fucking him out of a larger share of his money since his newfound popularity. Eric was right there when I would do it, I wasn't talking shit behind Eric's back. Nor did I believe this was true. That relationship between them was beyond manager and client. It was a twisted father and son story. Koz even slapped Eric in the face in public at a convention, just like a furious father. It's on YouTube, search it.

Eric and Koz were kind of working everyone with that love/hate thing. After one of our productions with Sheiky, we were breaking down the set and saying our goodbyes to him and Eric when I heard an aging, ailing Koz say, "Eric baba, maybe you rub my back. I sit too long." A little later while loading the truck, we saw through an unshuttered hotel window, Eric standing behind a seated, shirtless Sheik and working his shoulders and massaging down his spine. Son was taking care of Papa.

The foul-mouthed, mischievous, public persona of The Iron Sheik was amusing to all, I suspect, because people could sense it was real. He is the real article.

We co-produced the roast with James and Terence of Legends of the Ring. They would handle the live event aspect of this and KC would be in charge of the video production. We both shared creative decision-making power regarding the actual show and performances. Going over the more boring aspects of the show like venue logistics, catering, staging, power supply, ticketing and the like are still immensely important. It's the ditch digging of something like this but it's these details where the proverbial devil resides. We spent time meeting at the venue and ironing all this out. We wanted first-class all the way for *Ring Roasts I: A Comedic Tribute to the Iron Sheik.*

The audience would have light food at their fingertips served by a proper wait staff. We had an amazing V.I.P. ticket for fans that allowed them one-hour with all the talent to take photos and sign memorabilia in a private backstage area. We worked overtime to produce a show that wrestling fans would likely never forget.

We began to assemble the list of wrestlers and comics to make up the dais. For the wrestling contingent of the show, there were some names that

quickly stood out. We would need Sheiky's old pal and tag team partner Nikolai Volkoff. I wasn't sure how funny Nikolai could be at the mic, but I had a sense that his unfunny would be funny. He was in.

Brian Blair was a tag team wrestler and great amateur wrestler from the 80s that had little to do with The Iron Sheik's career. That is, until Blair's name came up fairly randomly in a shoot interview with Sheiky conducted by a company called Boston Wrestling. In the interview, The Iron Sheik absolutely loses his shit at the mention of Blair's name. Blair was a mid-card wrestler and, by all conventional thought, should have been filed way back in the mental Rolodex of The Iron Sheik. But in the mid 2000s in this interview, he resurrects a secret grudge he'd held since *Wrestlemania III* in 1987.

The interviewer, Dan Mirade, hilariously referred to as Dan Maloney by The Iron Sheik for the full, three-hour interview, asks for his impressions of working with Blair and tag partner Jim Brunzell at *Wrestlemania III*. Without provocation Sheiky turns to the camera and says, "Brian Blair, you are another faggot, son of a bitch, no-good, lowlife. I wanna let you know, you are punk, you are fag...worse than Michael Jordan, uh, I meanMichael Jackson."

Sheiky-Baby goes on to say he could have broken Blair's back while in the Sheik's finisher the Camel Clutch. "I could have break his back, make him humble, then *fuck his ass!"* Sheik repeats this regiment that he refers to as "old country way," referring specifically to making Blair humble by breaking his back and fucking his ass. Kozrow Vaziri is a Muslim and the fact that the plowing of another man's butthole would be firmly against his religion's tenets would be completely irrelevant to explore. The Iron Sheik is a Muslim that also drank and enjoyed illegal drugs. Such a discussion would be riddled with inconsistencies. Plus, why ruin the hateful, homoerotic diatribe with logic. It was just too entertaining.

The Iron Sheik would go on to regret the decision not to break Brian Blair's back and humble his ass the old country way on *The Howard Stern Show* as well. People loved this random assassination of the mild-mannered Brian Blair. It was so left-field and, no doubt, the imagery conjured up by Koz choosing to humble Blair in the manner depicted added to the laughter. It actually began to become his "take my wife please" made famous by comedian Henny Youngman. It was now a routine–expected and loved.

Forget the fact that there actually could have been no humbling of Blair because it was actually Brian's partner Jim Brunzell who was in the grips of Sheiky's Camel Clutch at *Wrestlemania III*. Small details like this would ruin the act. It would be unveiling Uncle Randy under the white beard and red hat on Christmas Eve. Let him go! He's the crazy-ass Iron Sheik!

So naturally, we called Brian Blair to attend the roast. This would be the first time the two would be in public together since the use of Blair as fodder for Sheiky's regiment of humbling young, hotshot wrestlers. Blair was actually the sitting County Commissioner for Hillsborough County in Florida and also operated some Gold's Gyms. Brian agreed rather quickly to come up north and be a part of the first *Ring Roasts.*

King Kong Bundy was added to the line up. Bundy is a charismatic guy and he was suggested by James. Tom Brandi and King Kahlua were added as a comedy team. Brandi told one of the best Iron Sheik stories of the night when he recounted Sheiky being sent for a piss test by WWE. Vince McMahon called Sheik to break some bad news.

"We got your results back," Vince started. "It came back positive."

"Exactly!" Sheik exclaimed. "Told you!"

Sheik Adnan al Kaissy, a former wrestling manager and classmate of Saddam Hussein in Iraq (that's a shoot) was added. That comedy set has to be seen to be believed.

I also lobbied hard for Eric Simms to be a part of the roast and do a set. Everyone agreed and almost before it finished coming out of my mouth, he agreed. Having seen my fair share of roasts I knew the members of the dais were also fair game for other speakers to light up. Eric was cannon fodder.

Don Muraco was in town to do our *Timeline: The History of WWE* and the convention as well. He agreed to do a set on *Ring Roasts*. Don turned out to be great fodder also, with King Kong Bundy telling wrestling journalist and roastmaster Bill Apter to wipe the dandruff off his jacket collar before Muraco snorted it. Ah, those 80's locker rooms.

As I mentioned, we asked Apter to host and be roastmaster for the evening. Bill is probably wrestling's most venerable journalist but more importantly, for me anyway, was that Bill had amazing comic timing. Bill was a student of the classic TV comics like Jerry Lewis and Bill loved the spotlight. He was a huge fan of musical theatre, in which my wife has been a long-time participant. Shit, as a high school senior I was Nathan Detroit in Memorial High's production of *Guys and Dolls*. I don't play, son. But I

knew talent when I saw it and Bill was a great foil for others and would be a professional and funny host. He was gold.

Booking the comics was an adventure. Since the Sheik was already working with Bob Levy and the Killers of Comedy, we naturally wanted them to be a part of show. We booked Levy, Sal the Stockbroker, and Beetlejuice. We formally announced the show and the website went live. Tickets started moving and the buzz was great.

Howard Stern had been doing some roasts on his radio show at that time. He was mostly holding roasts for his staff, but Levy and Sal were participating. The roast was coming back big time, across all mediums it seemed.

Then Levy called Eric Simms, who originally brokered them, and cancelled himself, Sal, and Beet. It was rather abrupt so I wanted an explanation. It was the least he could do, as this had been announced and advertised.

There's a caste system in the entertainment and wrestling businesses, and where you are in the pecking order determines how ethical others are to you. If you are a fan of shoot interviews or listen to wrestler podcasts then you have heard the tales of woe and mistreatment of wrestlers at the hands of greedy, unethical promoters. Please be very aware as you listen to them that as they are saying this into a microphone there is a log of shit dropping out of their ass onto someone who they perceive as below *them.* Flip back to the Introduction of this book for quick reference.

For the most part, wrestlers are paranoid and leery. They should be. They have had wicked deals and promoters who ran all kinds of schemes on them. Most have not been able to separate themselves from the mindset that the planet is populated by both charlatans and marks and everyone landed on one side or the other. Even if you were hiring them, you were either gonna try and fuck them over somehow, or you're a money mark, weak of spine, and then they smell blood. Either someone is out to get them or they go into predator mode and they're on the hunt.

Our reputation today has made things a lot easier for us. I've become friendly enough with a lot of the talent that a phone call or text and my word is good enough. But we had to get there.

Back during the first *Ring Roast* we had zero clout and no credibility on the comedy circuit. By rules of the jungle, this meant Levy could shit on us while expecting guarantees and proper booking ethics to be exhibited by

club owners above us on the totem pole. What was behind this sudden cancellation? The word I got was that Gary Dell'Abate, Howard Stern's long-time producer, didn't like the idea of their regular roasters doing this for a third party. It's a shame Bruno Sammartino isn't a comic.

Fearing losing the Stern gigs, Levy cut the line and our comics were gone, no different from the wrestler who doesn't call me back because WWE called about their Hall of Fame show. It all goes back to the pecking order. Have I mentioned what a class act Bruno Sammartino is?

Somehow I got put in touch with Dino Ibelli who is an owner of Uncle Vinny's Comedy Club in New Jersey. It was a premiere venue with quality names coming through there all the time. He agreed to put together a slate of comics for our roast for the price we wanted. Dino delivered for us, as we got Don Jamieson from *That Metal Show*, Mike Morse, "Round Boy" Jimmy Graham, and Ryan Maher who actually worked the indie wrestling scene as an announcer and referee. Career stability was a big thing for Ryan.

So now with comics in place and wrestlers on board, it was time to get the promotional machine going for *Ring Roasts*. Our first booking was on Scott Farrell's radio show. Scott is a wacky, sports radio guy who had a nighttime show on Sirius. On that Friday night, Eric Simms, myself, and Sheiky Baby piled in Eric's car around 9 p.m. and headed toward the Lincoln Tunnel and New York City.

If you've ever tried to drive into Manhattan on a weekend then you know that we were going to be confined to the car in standstill traffic for over an hour. Eric texted Ferrell's producer and said that we were stuck in traffic. We are listening to Ferrell on the car radio and he's saying "we just got word The Iron Sheik is on his way." We were crawling on the helix approaching the mouth of the tunnel.

The big problem is that now Koz has to piss. Badly. Prior to heading for the Ferrell show, we took Koz up to see his friend Ahmad who was a teammate of Koz's on the Iranian wrestling team. He now owned a middle eastern deli in Hackensack. It was cool to see all the spices and breads from that part of the world. Even more cool was his friend's photos of he and a young, full-haired Koz in their singlets. We sat around and bullshitted and Koz sucked down a few of his beloved Molsons. Sheiky took a couple for the road of course, so he banged those down on the Turnpike. Now we're

sitting in traffic, getting nowhere near the tollbooth, and Koz has a big problem. A ten-inch problem, if you believe him.

Sheik keeps telling Eric he has to piss, and Eric keeps saying there's nothing he can do. We are deadlocked in the middle lane on the approach to the tunnel. There's nowhere to go. Sheiky begins praying to Jesus now. Yes, a Muslim is praying to Jesus Christ. It's The Iron Sheik, anything goes.

The Sheik is getting increasingly desperate in his prayers and in his pleas to Eric, both of which are making no headway with either Jew. I am in the backseat and I'm terrified that he's going to piss himself and we will be locked in the car with that aroma. We are inching closer to the booth as the urine inches further through Koz's urethra in a snail's paced race of filth.

Kozrow Vaziri, despite the living caricature we see, is ultimately just a human being. Somehow he and Keith Richards were gifted with a superhuman constitution for bodily abuse. But damnit, beer is beer and Koz is gonna spray. Now!

"Stop car Eric!" Sheik demands.

"Koz don't get out of this car!" Eric screams.

We are ten yards from the tollbooth in that far-too-well-lit-to-try-anything-inconspicuous entrance to the tunnel. Port Authority police are walking the lanes with M-16s strapped on, guarding one of the city's prime targets in the terrormania days. Are we really going to witness a strapped cop watch a tipsy Iranian with a keffiyeh head wrap and a medal around his neck stumble out of a screaming Jew's car with his cock in his hand pissing all over the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel? How would *that* end?

"Koz, you can't get out here!" Eric exclaims.

He doesn't get out. Instead logic prevails and Koz utters the greatest reply ever.

"OH YEAH? OX BAKER DID IT!" Sheik stared furiously at Eric, awaiting a response.

Eric and I are silent. How do you reply to that?

We get through the tunnel, with Port Authority cops given no indication of what could have befallen them, and the New York Post having lost an amazing front-page story on the following morning. On the Manhattan side we pull down a dark street outside the tunnel somewhere in the 40s. Koz ambles out and heads right for a construction wall built around a site being built. He needs help steadying himself so there is Eric Simms holding up

The Iron Sheik in full regalia, moaning in ecstasy, as he pisses on the wall. Passersby must've tried to click their heels three times.

Koz hobbles back to the car with Eric and crunches himself into his seat.

"Okay, baba," he says. "Now we go do show."

No Koz, this *was* the show, baby.

. . .

Show day for the first *Ring Roasts* arrived and everything was going off without a hitch. Everyone made it into town okay. None of the other comics had pulled a "Levy," they were all coming. The venue was being set up and we looked ready.

Now, you might recall *Ring Roasts I* is best remembered for two events, and neither one involved comedy.

Shortly after the show began, I remember standing back on the camera platform surveying the scene. The dais was having a blast, the fans were super responsive, and the line at the bar in the room was long. The laughter should continue well into the evening. I even remember Terence from Legends of the Ring coming up to me excitedly and saying, "We have to do this every year!"

"So far so good," I said cautiously. I've been on a live stage enough times to know the show is over when the lights go off. The night was young. Plus there was added pressure on us because the deal we made was that Legends of the Ring had the house, and we had the video rights. The house was great. We had to make an afterlife out of this with the DVD sales or this would be a very expensive night out for the crew and I.

The comics were killing. They were all quite good but I have to say I was most impressed by Ryan Maher. I didn't know Ryan. No one there did. His mom didn't come.

I can give Ryan shit because he blew me away and I put him on all three *Ring Roasts.* His timing was great and he buried *everyone*. He was up first and, while that's not the most advantageous spot for a performer, it actually worked for him because after his set everyone was playing catch-up. It's a shame he isn't working anymore.

The room was not only full of fans, but interspersed throughout were wrestlers. This event was the talk of the town, well the wrestling town, and they wanted to see it. Mean Gene Okerlund, the iconic WWE, WCW, and

AWA announcer, was seated in the front row. Prior to show time he came up to me rather concerned that he might be caught by our cameras attending, oh my gosh, a *non*-WWE event! Perish the thought. Did producers deal with this when Gene went to see Barry Manilow?

“Say fella, those cameras can’t get me if I’m sitting here, can they?” the telltale baritone voice asked me. If I were on my game I would have sat him down then sent the hand-held cameraman to pull up a chair beside him.

I assured Gene he was safe from such a fate. Kevin Sullivan, Raven, Virgil and a host of legends were on hand to have a laugh at the inside humor that this first wrestling roast would provide. The great thing about this was that so many fans had insider knowledge of the wrestling business with the newsletters and programs like ours lighting the way. They could get the joke and laugh right alongside the wrestlers. The fans were having a blast sitting amongst their idols in the main ballroom and laughing at the jokes about Muraco snorting dandruff and Sheiky failing a piss test. This was unique and the workers were laughing as hard as the fans.

So I didn’t think twice when I saw Scott Hall enter the room.

Scott came in that night from another planet. He was stumbling and kind of wandering aimlessly in the back of the house behind our camera equipment, where there was a bunch of open space. Some fans began to notice him and started shouting out to him. There was a very well organized show happening on the stage and the distraction pissed me off. Scott was loving it though, unaware and without a care that he was stealing thunder from other wrestlers on the dais. More and more catcalls began to happen as attention began shifting to Hall. He was clearly in here on a mission to make a scene.

“Razor! Razor! Razor!” the crowd was now chanting. Hall is doing the crotch chop now, to the delight of fans now cheering above the show on the stage. I was debating making the call to halt what’s happening on stage until the crowd died down and got bored or Scott fell down and went to sleep.

Scott jumped onto the camera platform and was now holding the hand up to the ear, enticing the rabid crowd who now all began to revel in the spontaneity of an NWO style run-in. I slid next to Scott and asked him if he wanted to go up and do a set, because this was not working for the show.

“Uh...I don’t know the Sheik,” he slurred.

Okay, so instead let’s stand on the platform and continue this for a while. I recall only thinking that but maybe I did say it out loud because that’s

exactly what he did. Comic Jimmy Graham was at the mic and Hall began heckling him loudly. Hall wasn't getting the jokes, he could barely hear them over his own booing. He just wanted to start some shit.

"Ha ha ha...real funny...don't quit your day job," Scott is bellowing. You know, clever promos like that. Unfortunately, the timing of one of Graham's jokes was the perfect storm. Scott paused, the room quieted, and Jimmy Graham came to a joke involving Owen Hart's tragic fall and death in the ring.

Bang...Scott got his opportunity! Highly offended and getting his wish to be highly offended, he jumped off the camera platform, tripping our main power supply in the process and killing all cameras except one isolated hand-held that was wandering the front of the stage area. He headed for the stage and grabbed the comic by the neck and drove him backwards, pinning him against the rear wall of the stage. Wrestlers and our security head, Cliff, got Scott away from Jimmy Graham.

This was so unprofessional and I was ashamed that this event that I thought could be a cousin, however distant, of the legitimate comedy world was degenerating into a sloppy, lowbrow, wrestling event. All of my protestations and disclaimers that accompany the word "wrestling" when talking with people in the legit film and television world are suddenly justified by moments like this.

Despite my positioning myself as an artiste in that last paragraph, if you watch the footage of this attack I can be seen rushing to the stage holding a blank video release to have Scott sign. Fans are out of their seats and it is utter chaos. I stop the show as former wrestler Jim Powers, one half of the Young Stallions for Christ's sake, is trying to wrangle Scott. As I understood it, Scott was partying in Powers' room before heading down here. I was happy Powers wanted to move that party back upstairs.

Scott had released Jimmy Graham and now took the mic and sought this opportunity to reclaim the honor of his fallen friend Owen Hart. He was slurring into the mic that everyone should "ask God to say 'hi' to Owen." Owen, from what I've heard of him, was probably pissing his pants laughing from above while planning the prank phone call he'd be making from the heavens to the hotel about a lawsuit later. Scott then finished off the touching memorial with a series of DX "suck it" crotch chops. He left the stage and began walking the crowd making a scene now, as fans just started kind of following along, like an ECW into-the-crowd brawl.

It was impossible to get Scott out of the room. He just kept going from area to area, dropping in a seat, getting up, walking to another seat. Jim Powers is still doing his damnedest to get him out, even using some physicality with Scott, and Powers still looked like he did in his heyday. James came up to me and assured me they were going to get Scott to sit down and relax.

"Get him the fuck out of here!" I yelled. "Just call the cops! End it!"

After 20 minutes or so, Hall wandered out. As I understand it, he went into the hotel bar, got into an altercation with a patron, and was arrested by N.J. State Troopers. He should have gone back up to Jim Powers' room and finished his weed.

Back in the ballroom, our cameras were back up and Kevin Sullivan asked for the microphone and spoke to the audience to get them to restore order. He worked his magic and the crowd began to settle in for the second half of the show. They couldn't say they didn't get their money's worth thus far!

Eric Simms's set bombed horrendously, but he was addressing an incredibly raucous crowd after the Scott Hall incident. I thought a few of his jokes were funny. I wrote them.

The second event for which *Ring Roasts* lives in infamy involved Brian Blair and The Iron Sheik.

Brian Blair's set did nothing to ease the tensions between he and Sheiky. It was a roast after all, but the known history, however mysterious its origins beyond Sheik offering to humble Brian's ass, made it a nail-biter for the audience who didn't laugh as much as they "ooh'd" and "ahhh'd." The camera caught Sheiky's discomfort very clearly. This wasn't going over well. The tension was compelling but maybe this was a mistake. Maybe Koz would be pissed at me for inviting Blair.

At the conclusion of the show I asked Sheik and Brian Blair to shake hands to close the show. It would be a good moment for the show and also would put a punctuation mark on the strange feud. Brian didn't so much have issues with Koz. His jokes may have been a little stiff at the roast, but he'd been listening to The Iron Sheik say he should have broken his back and humbled him all over the place, from the shoot videos to Howard Stern. Shit, I would have been stiff too.

When Brian and Koz came face to at the podium Brian was smiling and ready to shake. Koz was neither smiling, nor ready to shake Brian's hand. I

stood between them, a step back so they could share the spotlight. Sheik now starts berating Blair and cutting a promo on him. Fans are eating it up, and Brian is even smiling, indicating to me with a wave of his hand, *let him go.* Sheik was doing his thing, and Brian was smiling and getting a kick out of it. He steps closer and leans into the Sheik.

"I just came here for a handshake from you," Blair says.

"A handshake?" Koz replies. He then hauls off and smacks Blair across the head with a vicious open hand. It sounded like a gunshot. You can find it on YouTube or on the special features of our DVD. I jumped between them, grabbing Blair's arms as he was going to do unholy damage to the aging Sheik who was barely walking at that time. Security hadn't made it onstage yet so it was just me between them. I looked over to Eric Simms who was just kind of standing there. I screamed at him to get Koz out of here. I was angry at the whole thing.

I tried to talk Blair down but he was angry and felt betrayed by me. He was an elected official in Florida and here he is in some violent incident in New Jersey. I had guaranteed his safety and that he'd be part of a classy, entertainment event. This night was a circus. He was bitching me out on the side of the stage, and that is all lovingly caught on-camera and part of the extra features on the DVD set. Cliff led us to the elevators and up to Brian's room where I safely deposited him with his traveling companion, the late journalist Mark Nulty. Mark already had the computer up. The story was all over the place.

And that's how we planned it.

The work or shoot question came up the second this went down and almost everything audiences saw came off as the perfect shoot. But it wasn't.

Late in the afternoon on the day of the show, I was texted by James to come up to a certain room in the hotel. I'd seen all the talent throughout the day as they were coming into the hotel, but between the logistics of the live show and the video shoot I was busy with the setup. I hadn't seen anyone in a while and seeing, *Sean come up to room 315* on my phone made me queasy. What was wrong? Whose flight was delayed? Cancelled? Why is it imperative that this news be told to me in person? Can't he type it?

I headed upstairs and was met by James in the hallway.

"Hey, Brian wants the Sheik to hit him," he said. James doesn't do drugs but I was sure my favorite, stocky Brooklynite was high.

“No way. He doesn’t even know why he’s pissed at him,” I said. “I don’t think Brian is gonna want any part of that.”

James chuckled. “Okay. Go inside.” I did.

I entered the cloudiest, loudest room you could imagine. Making my way through the smoke, I saw Sheiky sitting around with Brian Blair, the Taskmaster Kevin Sullivan, Terence from Legends of the Ring, and Eric Simms. The Molsons were flowing freely, the music was on, and everyone was laughing and smiling. Was it 1987? Where were the rats?

They’d all been talking and thought that there needed to be an altercation to end the show. I had the final *yay* or *nay*. I told them off the bat that this had to be believable and we would need to work through this to make sure it came across as organic. We would be skewered for pulling off a shitty, indie angle if this was going to be obvious. So we at least had to keep people guessing. We had to work to find a believable scenario.

There was a real big part of me that had a problem with what was being discussed. The whole premise of our company was drawing the curtain back on the work and talking about how all the gears turned. Now I’m planning to work fans. I felt like a doctor selling cigarettes out of his office.

The logistics of the hit were being discussed. *Should he hit him during Brian’s set?* No, I said. Fans need to get the whole show they paid for. It can happen after. *Why wouldn’t Brian hit back?* I’ll grab him, I said. And Eric can grab Koz.

Suddenly, Kevin Sullivan goes into booker mode and starts booking this slap. At least I think it was Kevin, through all the cigarette smoke. Well, it was a small, stocky, gray-haired thing with a Boston accent. Maybe Yoda is from Springfield.

“Sean,” the bookerman started, “you gotta be involved. You been on TV shows, you can do this and make it real.” I beamed. Oh wait, it’s a wrestling roast.

“Your face has to be between them,” he continued. “You’re not a wrestler (pronounced ressel-ah). The people gotta see the shock and horror on your face. That’s gonna sell it. And you can do it.” Okay that’s it. Where’s my Oscar?

I suggested that Brian do his set, and make it kinda stiff. I told Koz not to react *at all* to Blair’s set. Don’t be angry, don’t make any silly wrestler faces. Just sit and be stoic. Be still. I told Eric not to do anything at all either. Don’t comfort Sheik, don’t engage him. He should just be looking

around like he's praying for this to end fast. Just like Sheik should do. *No laughter,* but also *no anger.* Just sit through the uncomfortable wait for something annoying to end.

The last person up was always the honoree, so Sheiky would have the last set. He would say whatever he was going to, but Blair would come to the podium and he would get hit. I thought Blair should come up for a handshake to end the show and I would say that on the mic. It would start to smell like a rat (a big, fat, Travelodge one) if Blair came up for a confrontation, Sheik hit him and Blair couldn't get one off himself. But if he were really caught off guard, that second of shock would allow me to drop the mic and jump in front of Blair, with Simms pulling Sheik away too. It had to be over as fast as it happened. These things happen in real-life in the blink of an eye. No protracted taunting and wrestler shit. Well, Koz would cut a Sheik-style promo on Blair. Fans paid to see that. But when the good-natured Blair asks for the handshake and fans wonder if there will be one, there's the pop, scramble, confusion, *what the hell just happened?*

The only people that knew of this plan were the people in that room, plus Anthony and Craig, who were on cameras A and B. I wanted them to be ready but disorganized. They should fight for the framing a bit when it happened. The cameras needed to scramble a bit to catch the unplanned fracas. You know, like they *didn't* do in Montreal for Bret and Shawn's *Survivor Series*.

I told our C camera's handheld operator, Tim, to just "follow the action whatever happens and when I leave the stage with Brian Blair, come over and get tight on us. When we leave, walk behind us to the elevator doors, but don't get in." Okay, Anthony and Craig would shoot the mess on the stage, Tim would have good B-roll of that, and then run over and get Blair bitching me out. Blair didn't know I planned to walk him off stage and have a camera run over, but he'd figure it out pretty quickly. All these guys were pros.

I was nervous about Eric and Koz staying straight. I was nervous about the hit looking soft. I decided if anything looked bad I wasn't putting it in the DVD of the show. I would fade out and go to credits with Blair asking for the handshake.

Imagine my surprise when there was a *real* attack on a comic by a raging, drunk wrestler. We might be a little late with this slap. The crowd went wild when Scott Hall attacked Jimmy Graham. They'd have that kind of shit out

of their system by the time Sheik got to pop Blair in the mouth. I figured they might yawn at it.

The Scott Hall thing was being carried by the wrestling press already. I was getting reports that the *Scott Hall Attacks Comic at Iron Sheik Roast* headline was making the rounds. Okay, that got us on the radar tonight. Seems that may have served a purpose after all. People certainly had their camera phones out, ready for anything that night after the Hall deal. They'd have something to film at the curtain call.

During Blair's set, Sheik and Eric played it off very well. They weren't hokey. They sat and waited, expressionless. Which, to the viewer's eye, made them look like they were raging inside.

In my film school waste of time, I learned of the Kuleshov Effect. Lev Kuleshov was a Soviet filmmaker in the 1920s who crafted a very progressive experiment with film that was light years ahead of its time. Kuleshov intercut a shot of an expressionless actor, just staring into the camera, with a shot of a bowl of soup...then a girl in a coffin...then a woman on a sofa. When shown to separate audiences, they said, upon seeing the man "look" at the soup, that he was very hungry. When the man was "looking" at the girl in the coffin, he was grief stricken, an audience said. When he was "looking" at the woman, that particular audience said he was lusting after her. Of course, Kuleshov used the same exact shot of the bored actor for all three films.

That ridiculous diatribe is only to illustrate that by having Eric and Koz do nothing while Blair insulted them...the audience would do everything.

The end of the show came and Sheiky started his rant. The audience was eating it up. Blair came up with a smile, good-natured, and played his part great...until the hit, for which Blair stumbled backwards, I felt overselling it, a la *Saturday Night's Main Event.*

That hit was fucking brutal, I was two feet from it, trust me. It would have taken off my head. But not Brian's. Blair was in amazing shape still, and it was an open hand slap. I'm sure it would have buckled him a bit, maybe knocked him a little off balance, into the table on the dais. But Blair spun and stumbled in the other direction. It was small, but I think that detail put doubt in people's minds. Sure, the jaded wrestling fan would have suggested "work" the minute they heard that Sheik hit Blair. But *seeing* the actual event would not have been an indicator of that. Natural assumption would, but not the visual. And for this to work I needed that ambiguity.

Still I think it went off rather well. Blair and I had out little exchange for the handheld after the shot, and it followed us to the elevator. Blair and I were on the elevator with someone who we didn't know, as well as Cliff, the security guard. He wasn't smartened up about it either, so Blair and I stood in silence in the elevator. Poor Cliff. He's about 6'8" and 300 lbs. looking like a slimmer Mark Henry, and we put his big ass to work that night, between Scott Hall's attack and now this fracas. Whenever I'd see him working security in the months after the event, he would shake his head and just say, "No more, please! No more roasts!"

We got off the elevator on Blair's floor and walked to his room. I told Cliff I could handle it from here, we were safe. Blair opened his door and we stepped in. When the door closed behind us, Blair turned to me, smiled, and we hugged, laughing. Mark Nulty had all the news sites up.

"This is *crazy!"* Mark said.

Leaving Blair's room I still had some doubt as to whether we pulled it off 100%. Blair's big stumble, plus the contrarian nature of the wrestling fan might create a backlash. As I was walking to the elevator, Don Muraco was returning to his room, having done well sitting on the dais being cannon fodder. He was probably thirty feet down the hallway when he saw me and stopped and laughed.

"Okay, I'm a mark now," he began. "Was it real?"

I didn't break my stride to the elevator.

"It was wrestling," I said. "Good night, Don."

. . .

With the inaugural *Ring Roasts* behind us, it was time to get the DVD out so we'd finally see some return on our investment. We had momentum with all the press that the two incidents brought to the event. We would make them special features on the second DVD in the set.

The DVD did well for us and as part of the push we got booked on *The Howard Stern Show*. We sent an advance copy to the studio and they trimmed clips of Sheik hitting Blair, and also Eric Simms's terrible comedy set. They ribbed Eric about it on the air and they showed the slap. Howard read the website for the plug. Home run.

It was surreal being up there after having been a Stern fan so long. I met Ronnie, Gary, Robin, Will, and stood in the hallways and green room that

I'd seen so many times on TV. The other guest that morning was Hugh Jackman who headed in first. We were in an outer green room waiting and Eric Simms saw Jackman pass by and head into the inner sanctum. Eric popped and said to the security guard in our room that it would be a great idea if Hugh Jackman posed for a picture with The Iron Sheik. Yes, that's exactly what Hugh Jackman needed at that time in his career, coming off playing Wolverine. Maybe I should run in and offer him a spot on *Ring Roasts II.*

The security guard just smiled and kept on going about his business. Just before Hugh was done, the door to the inner wing opened and Ronnie Mund, Howard's driver and bodyguard, flies out.

"Let's go," he begins, "and no fucking pictures with Hugh Jackman! I'm serious!" The security guard had ratted Eric out to Ronnie. The guard was obviously told to keep an eye on Simms. Turns out Eric was banned from the inner area of the Stern show last time the Sheik was on after driving everyone nuts about some shit. Ronnie was letting us all in this time, but he obviously got wind of Eric preparing to bother Hugh Jackman about a photo. All I gave a shit about was getting that plug read and getting some discussion going about the roast. We got both.

Eric and Sheik went inside for their segment. As I was sitting in the green room listening to the show on the radio, I hear Sheiky start to throw my name around in talking about the roast.

"Please Howard, let the Sean Olivier come in and tell you about it," he said to Howard. By the way, in all the times I worked with Koz, I never corrected him once with the Olivier thing. I loved it. Well, here he is putting me over and telling Howard he had to talk to me. Almost as soon as he said it, Will Murray, a producer, appeared in the doorway of the green room and told me to leave my phone and head in with him.

Holy fuck. I was headed into Mecca.

But why? What would I add? My mind scrambled through a million things in the three seconds it took to drop my Blackberry on a table and walk to the doorway. If Howard gives you his mic, he's also giving you 20 million listeners. You better deliver. He's in the business of keeping them entertained.

What could I add to the discussion, which was basically how Eric is a tool and Sheik is driven nuts by him? Maybe relay the story about seeing the shirtless backrub through the hotel window? Or maybe the Lincoln

Tunnel story? Should I make up something outlandish? Scandalous? I would have to bring it, either way.

Just as I was headed in, Will and I hear the radio above us.

“Okay,” Howard says to Sheik. “We can bring him in a second. But first we have a call for you.” They liked to prank Sheik with phony phone calls where the staff would call in and pose as wrestlers and wind Koz up and get him yelling. We stopped short of going in as they started playing a call with show writer Artie Lange posing as an angry wrestler on the phone. They got off on that track and that was it. I never got in. Maybe that was for the best, as I may have panicked and in my rush to be entertaining told a story about Simms sodomizing a yak.

The one time I *did* get to talk with Howard was on the phone when Chyna was on his show as a guest. She’d also recently referred to the sex tape that she and Sean Waltman made as a “rape tape” when she was on *YouShoot.* It bothered me and I think it bothered Waltman, who was a friend of ours. I called into the Stern show when I heard her on there. I just wanted Howard to ask her about it, maybe she would take it back. The accusation was asinine. It appeared she was having a grand ol’ time in that video. It certainly didn’t look like anything she was doing was coerced.

I called Eric and I asked for the direct line to the office. He had Will Murray’s direct line. I called and I told Will who I was and what she said on our show. I said he should send a message into Howard and get her to answer her “rape tape” comment.

“Do you wanna just ask it yourself?” Will asked. I didn’t expect that.

“Sure.” Fine with me.

He put me on hold and, seriously, within 3 minutes Howard selected my call. They weren’t even taking calls at that time of the interview, so Will must’ve notified him on the computer that there may be some good shit coming.

“Sean from New Jersey,” Howard said. “Go ahead.”

They were all familiar with the porno, so I explained what she said on our show *YouShoot* (got the plug in) and asked her to answer for that comment. She gave some half-assed justification. As cool as it is to have something of value to contribute to the Stern Show, I was happier that I tried to get some retraction for Waltman. He didn’t deserve that rape comment.

Well before that call though, I nearly got into the studio. That would have been otherworldly. I always said if I ever met Howard, I wanted to do it as a

guest and not a dickboy fan. It almost happened.

After that great appearance by the Sheik we headed back to Jersey and hit and old favorite diner of mine outside the tunnel. There is nothing subtle about The Iron Sheik and walking into a diner with him, complete with his suit, AAU medal, and keffiyeh on his head made every head turn. Throughout the meal he signed autographs for the staff and took a couple of photos with fans. People loved the Sheik and he loved being loved.

When breakfast was over I asked Koz to give me the check, I'd take care of it.

"No, Mr. Sean, I handle it." How nice. Koz was paying. Simms sat like a fucking statue when the bill came, he certainly didn't move a hand. But Koz just took the check, thanked the waitress who dropped it off, crumbled the check up and stuffed it in his pocket. Was he kidding? She would just write another one if we said we got no check. I told him that.

"No, no," Koz began. "Special price for the Sheik."

We headed toward the door. Sheik was waving at the room. The men who were running the place were at the register waiting to greet him.

"Gentlemen! I love you!" Sheik says, inexplicably hugging them. As Sheik is doing this distraction, Eric, who was clearly no stranger to this routine with his client, bolts out the door. I am still standing there, morally obligated not to leave before a bill is paid. But Koz, while hugging the owner, reaches out with his right hand and shoves me as hard as he can into the glass door to the diner. I get the hint and head out. Koz turns after releasing the owner and blows kisses to the diner, who are now applauding, including the owners and the cashier who were all just fucked on the bill. Sheik blows his kisses, shouts his love to the room, and turns and strolls out the door. We all hopped in Eric's getaway car and we were off, just like that. After a few minutes, Koz turns to Eric.

"Eric baba, breakfast good for price."

And right there, yet another saying beaten to death by the KC crew, is born.

. . .

A few months after the Sheik roast, James calls me with the idea for *Ring Roasts 2* featuring Terry Funk as the honoree. From a content standpoint Terry could touch a lot of bases. You had fans of classic wrestling, and we

could have some great stars of yesteryear appear on the show. But Terry was also an ECW fixture, so that opened a more contemporary door. Anthony was more skeptical than I was. He wondered how much comedy would come out of a Terry Funk roast. We decided to go with it.

We assembled a great lineup of wrestlers like Mick Foley, Superstar Graham, New Jack, Mike Graham, Kevin Sullivan, Dennis Stamp, Kevin Von Erich, J.J. Dillon, Missy Hyatt, and King Kong Bundy returned. And basically did the same damn set. Bill Apter returned as roastmaster and was great.

We kept comedian Ryan Maher and added new comics. It was a stocked dais and I thought they should kill. We had one problem–everyone loves Terry Funk. I never considered the sheer love that workers had for Terry. No one would roast him! They told stories, laughed, thanked him, but no one went for the kill in traditional roast fashion. They couldn't. Terry is too lovable. It was a lovely night, complete with the presentation of a fucking oil painting of Terry that Billy Graham did. I was growing more and more aware as the night went on that, although the cannon fodder on the dais like Missy Hyatt and Dennis Stamp took shots, no one was roasting Terry. The problem with that, you see, is that this was the fucking *roast* of Terry Funk.

Although no one attacked a comic or smacked a Hillsborough County official, the night wasn't without it's aches and pains. New Jack was a guest at the event. I briefed him on where and when to meet for pre-show instructions, and I never saw him again until I was on stage introducing the cast. Jack told me years later he was in the men's room doing blow with another former ECW wrestler. So he missed his introduction for a good reason at least.

New Jack hijacked the show a couple of times to an embarrassing extent. He left the dais, took a mic and wandered around in front of the stage. He went back at comics when they roasted him. At a *roast.* So the event ended up being either being that madness or workers sucking Terry's dick at the mic.

At a *roast.*

I had a so-so taste in my mouth at the end of the night. We had a fun show in the can, but I'm not sure we had a roast. There were some laughs and even some tears. Anthony described it as "CATS."

In editing, I would trim down New Jack's set and cut out his unwanted diatribes. The show was tight and in the edit I found it to be funnier than I

remembered that night. We released it and fans had a lukewarm reaction to it. Reviews were okay, but this was a big production and the return wasn't worth the significant investment and headache. I could have sat down with Funk and done an episode of another KC series with just the two of us and had a similar return, with a quarter of the expense of the roast.

I wasn't quite ready to quit on the concept though. I needed one more shot at the wrestling roast concept before I made any judgments. We would do a third and see if the market warmed to this yet. We needed another name that would *not* elicit a love-fest, yet be fun. It would help if they were a draw in the shoot market as well. We looked no further than Jim Cornette who was, by that time, a frequent KC collaborator. We dug into Corny's wrestling past and brought out Dennis Condrey, Bobby Eaton, Al Snow, Nick Dinsmore, Missy Hyatt returned, Dutch Mantell, Prince Nana, Bob Holly, and Amy Lee.

Dutch was a great guy to meet, considering his history in wrestling on both sides of the camera. On this weekend of the roast we were able to get a great edition of *Guest Booker* with Dutch Mantell as well, but it's a very funny story how Dutch came to be on the roast. Jim called me after we announced his roast publicly. We hadn't attached any names to it yet, except maybe the Midnight Express because we knew going in that we wanted them with Jim on the dais. Corny leaves me a voice mail that he'd like to have some input on a few guests, if that was okay with us. There was one name that he wanted on there and we could talk about it when I called him back. He hung up his rotary phone and waited for my call.

Hearing his voice mail I got excited and called Anthony. Who could it be? The name was too big to even mention on the phone! This is the big one, I told him. He's probably gonna ask to put on Flair. Corny will make a call to him and it will happen. Flair would do it dirt-cheap too, as a favor to his old pal. But he didn't say a name…it could be *anyone!* This was like Christmas Eve. Anthony and I fantasized. Flair was my obvious pick but Anthony went back further in Cornette's story, suggesting Lawler. Another great choice! *Guest Booker* may be a piece of shit concept for losers but surely he'd think *Ring Roasts* was genius. That's it…it's "The King!" Has to be.

No wait, what about Ted Turner? He was a huge wrestling fan and loved to stop by TBS studios when the Saturday morning tapings were going on. Wrestling kept his Channel 17 afloat when he first started putting original

programming on there. What a coup this would be. I'd *love* to have a scotch or twenty with Ted and talk about his old days, inheriting the billboard advertising company from his dad and turning it into the multi-million dollar media empire that it was. He would have such great wisdom to impart. And he was funny as hell. He'd be *great* for the show. Cornette's roast was shaping up in a big way. He didn't want to tell me on the phone because he didn't know if I was driving and I might crash into a wall or something when my hard-on erupted in my pants.

Well hang on, Dusty Rhodes was the booker for most of Corny's run in the Carolinas and WCW. The American Dream would light that roast on fire! It has to be Dusty.

I returned his call.

"Hey listen," he began as I beat my dick like it owed me money. "I was gonna ask you if you'd put someone on that I worked with—"

Yes, yes...

"—back in the day. I know you're holding the purse strings—"

Give it to me baby!

"—so I wanted to get permission before calling anyone I wanted to be on the roast up there—"

Permission you have, mon friar!

"—because I'd love it if Dutch Mantell could do this for me."

In walks mom and the remote is on the other side of the room. Downward dick.

"Oh, sure," I said.

I love Dutch. I loved having Dutch. I loved our *Guest Booker.* I love what putting Dutch on our shows did for his book and later for his career.

Let me tell you how cool Dutch Mantell is, now that I've shit all over him. Dutch came to me the day of the roast. He said he knew a guy that did a great Vince Russo impersonation. Why don't we have the kid show up, take the mic, and start cutting a promo on Corny. Corny can whack him with the racquet for the finale of the show. It sounded a little too contrived for me. I looked at James and Anthony and they just kind of shrugged. I told Dutch we'd think about it.

I was against it. Unless this guy was dead-on, it would be goofy. Plus, people were already speculating that Vince would show up and do a run-in. If we said Russo was here and the room popped, I didn't want to disappoint

them a minute later with a bad impersonation. I ultimately said no. A little while later James came up to me in the ballroom.

“Hey,” he said. “They really want to do it.”

“Who?”

“Dutch and Cornette,” he said. “They both came up to me just now. Why don’t we let them?”

With that, the tag team of James E. Cornette and “Dirty” Dutch Mantell come into the room and double team me. My tag partner, James, has been knocked unconscious and awakened thinking he’s on the other team. Jim and Dutch start working me over with their ideas. I’m being pummeled with rapid-fire suggestions. Then Dutch starts booking this like it’s Saturday morning TV.

“During the show, I’m gonna keep getting phone calls on my cell,” he began. “I’ll step off the stage while I take the calls so the audience sees me. I’ll do it two or three times while other people are up on the mic. That way, when ‘Russo’ shows up later, people will remember that I got calls and they’ll put two and two together and realize it was him calling me.”

Talk about intricate booking. He *told* me that plan and during the actual show when he got up and left the dais the first time to take the call I wondered why he was going to take a shit *now*?!

I relented and agreed to hear the guy’s voice if they’d have him call me later. I did get a call and the guy did his Russo impression for me that sounded vaguely like someone from the northeast, maybe New York, maybe on a bad phone connection, maybe while in a tunnel. Aw hell, it’s all in the spirit of fun. *Come on down, son! Wear a Giants jersey. Hey, anyone do a good Ted Turner?*

Corny was roasted, unlike Terry Funk. This was a hilarious show and I thought maybe, just maybe, the Corny magic broke the spell of cursed *Ring Roasts.* Cornette was great in his closing set, and Nick Dinsmore shocked the hell out of me by being so good. I hoped this would be the one to save the series.

It didn’t. Returns were far less than a standard interview of Cornette’s on one of our shows and this cost a shitload more. I looked back at all three editions of *Ring Roasts* and I saw troubling things. I had to come to an understanding that wrestling fans liked comedy, and wrestling fans liked wrestling. They didn’t like *comedy about wrestling.* In some cases both fans

and reviewers (and New Jack) took offense that comics who were “never in the ring” were joking about wrestlers and disrespecting them. At a *roast!*

Not enough people knew what a roast was, I think. We’d initially thought the Comedy Central roasts would have brought them back to the attention of the average wrestling fan. But if wrestling fans were posting their annoyance at the comics that roasted the wrestlers, then obviously that hadn’t happened. That was it for *Ring Roasts.*

7. The Misses

For all of our success with *YouShoot*, *Guest Booker*, and *Timeline: The History of WWE*, there are those other moments from which we learn. Tucked within mistakes and failures lay the lesson. Don't lose the lesson. It makes your errors worthwhile.

My Side of the Story was my favorite show at the time of its release. It was so unique and I've always been fascinated by what makes certain feuds successful draws for months, and occasionally years. We were firing on all cylinders and trying some experimental stuff for our market. Actually, doing *anything* other than reading a list of questions to talent was experimental in the shoot market. But *My Side of the Story* went to a whole new level. It was shot very stylized, and the editing of each party's answers beside the other's made it such a departure in both style and format that I don't think fans knew how to process it.

I stand by my assertion that the series was ten years ahead of its time. Nowadays the shoot content on WWE Network and other producers' programs take many non-traditional forms. But back in 2008, fans' expectation of a shoot was the traditional interview. We were working to broaden those parameters but it wasn't there yet. Fans' minds were still being blown by the *YouShoot* format where I'm asking fan questions, showing videos and playing games with the talent. Now here's this show where two separate interviews are intercut. I greatly underestimated the massaging it takes for a market, especially one filled with people as

dedicated and addicted as shoot fans, to accept outside-the-box formatting. It's initially uncomfortable, unexpected. Although today, largely thanks to us, wrestling shoot content has seemingly no set form. Just watch, I'm sure WWE is hard at work on a facsimile of our original *My Side of the Story*. People are gonna love it.

While critics embraced the lengths to which we went to build a unique chronicle of wrestling's great feuds, viewers were slow to take to it. There was great disparity in revenue between that series and our editions of *YouShoot* and *Guest Booker.* The pilot edition of *My Side of the Story* starred Greg "The Hammer" Valentine and Tito Santana. They had a ridiculously long feud for the Intercontinental Title in WWE in 1984-85. They wrestled each other all over the country for a year and a half and fans never tired of seeing them go at it. We followed that up with Nikita Koloff and Magnum T.A. who had the classic U.S. vs. U.S.S.R. feud as nuclear tensions in the world were significant.

I think the shows turned out great and this format would have been fun to watch evolve. But it was an expensive show. We would need to pay two wrestlers per show. Shoot time was doubled, because they were interviewed separately. Travel was double what it usually is when I'm hosting with a single guest. It was a time consuming show. It required ironing out a lot of scheduling issues to nail down both segments of the show. We'd need the guys separately for the first segment and then together for the final segment, which required a full turnaround of the set. Factor in their other obligations while in town like autograph signings and whatnot, it could be a challenge to nail the whole show especially if we have another series to shoot. We tend to block-book these shows, as that can amortize expenses across all the productions. Meals, locations fees, contractors, and travel expenditures can be broken across two or three productions instead of being hung on the back of a single show.

Ultimately, the two episodes of *My Side of the Story* didn't go over as I'd hoped. With all the other considerations I mentioned, we needed a good earner to keep this one going. It had very moderate sales. We cancelled the series and moved on before we spent too much more time and money on it.

Ringside was the series we launched with Vader and his 5-Hour Energy. Well, the series could have used a shot of it because it couldn't get any traction. Despite our using that announcer's table format to explain the monitor that we'd be watching the matches on, I just think fans couldn't get

used to staring at the back of the monitor while someone watched something they couldn't. It seems rude, in retrospect.

Two editions in, the premiere with Vader and the next with Demolition, complete with make-up tutorial, and the series was stale. I had designs on cancelling it down the road, but I wanted to give it one more shot. Maybe it was the talent that wasn't working, though I doubted that. The key to keeping that series interesting was using talent that had storied careers and interesting matches to pick apart. I think Vader and Demolition were a good one-two punch out of the gate.

For the third installment we booked Terry Funk. Talk about a storied career. There would be plenty to pick through. Terry had *such* a long and diverse career that we decided we could only cover the early NWA years. His ECW and WWE run would come in later editions if the moribund series could awaken.

We also added a new host. I don't think I was the problem with *Ringside,* but you have to mix things up and try different formulas and chemistry sometimes. We tapped Bill Apter to host the series and he'd do his first edition with Terry. It made sense to have Bill host this since he was most likely *literally* at ringside taking photos for the magazines as these matches happened. He could add some insight to some of these matches that I couldn't. Maybe he'd spoken to the talent that night in the dressing room before the very match we'd be covering in the show. It was just another possible layer that might work for the show. "This is Bill Apter, at Ringside" was a great hook. Bill was usually...*at Ringside!*

Even the great Bill Apter couldn't get the stove lit here but it wasn't his fault. Conceptually, the absence of viewers seeing any match footage while talent referenced things happening on the screen was an insurmountable hurdle. Sales for this, like *My Side of the Story,* weren't horrible. It wasn't a bomb. It just couldn't get off the ground and perform along the lines of our other series. We want to deliver for fans. If they don't like something, then *I* don't like it either. *Ringside* was cancelled shortly after *My Side of the Story.*

Within a very successful series you can certainly have editions that don't work, like a TV series that gets lost in a storyline that viewers just can't get into. Better come back next week with a kick ass episode, blow some shit up, or your fickle followers will start invoking the deadly "jumped the

shark” designation. And within our successful series we have had our share of moments that didn’t work.

Guest Booker is a show that is very much tied to the guest. It’s a profile of their creative process so each edition is as interesting as they are. I sometimes read fan posts where they’ll decry the existence of an edition of *Guest Booker* because they didn’t like the guest being profiled, or didn’t like what they did during the booking exercise of the show. I don’t use that criteria to decide whether an edition of *Guest Booker* was good. I actually think it’s ridiculous. Let’s say you were watching a series on The History Channel called *The U.S. Presidents* and you came to the Richard Nixon episode. On that show they chronicle his tenure as president and discuss his decisions and the logic behind them, as they did with every president on every episode.

If you personally didn’t like Nixon and his decisions, can you really say “that episode sucked” because you didn’t think Nixon was a good president? Is the episode of the show bad if it accurately captured the man, his actions, and his mindset? Seems idiotic doesn’t it? Well that doesn’t stop viewers, and even some reviewers, from criticizing an edition of *Guest Booker* because they didn’t agree with how that particular booker dealt with an angle or storyline that we presented him with on our show. The goal of that show is to accurately chronicle the booking philosophies of each guest and then display their abilities in real-time with the booking exercise. A particular booker’s appearance on *Guest Booker* is an accurate illustration of their talents (or lack thereof) and philosophies, if the show is done right.

Mike Graham’s edition of the show sought to not only chronicle the creative mind of Mike, but also give us an insight into his late father’s, the legendary Eddie Graham. On his edition of the show, we covered the Florida territory and his father’s booking style. Mike had great, personal stories about his dad and his business. He had insight into his father’s suicide, which had been attributed to things as far reaching as his top star Dusty Rhodes’s departure from the Florida territory. Mike assured us that it wasn’t Dusty that had anything to do with Eddie’s decision to end his life. Eddie had a large real estate deal blow up and he’d recently been left by his woman. It was likely those elements that had a larger hand in it than any one talent. After Eddie’s death, Mike took the booking duties and tried to keep the territory alive. It was short lived.

Equally as dead as the Florida territory was the booking exercise segment of this edition of *Guest Booker.* We shot the front end of the show and broke to discuss where the booking exercise would be going, and to set up the dry erase board and reframe the cameras. Mike began asking us for booking ideas, for which, initially, we were happy to make suggestions. But those suggestions began to become the show.

"Guys, I can't do this," Mike flatly said. We tried talking him through it for a bit longer but it was absolutely clear that we were booking this show. We couldn't air that. There was no booking exercise on that edition of the show. After our taping, Mike joined some other wrestlers in the hotel restaurant. We were at an adjacent table and overheard the workers asking Mike how he did for the booking exercise.

"I booked my way out of it," he was heard to say to the laughter of the boys. We found it less funny than they did.

Shortly thereafter, on December 15, 2010, Mike's son Steven committed suicide in Florida. I hadn't spoken to Mike since the show but by all accounts his boy's death destroyed him. According to wrestlers who maintained contact with Mike, he was decimated by a land deal in the dying Florida real estate market of the late 2000s, very similar to his dad's predicament. Then on October 19, 2012, Mike Graham tragically turned a gun on himself and committed suicide just as Eddie had done 27 years earlier, and his son had done more recently, effectively ending three generations of Graham men to suicide.

. . .

We worked with Missy Hyatt for *YouShoot* and also had her as a convention guest to launch that DVD. We stayed in touch and she always put the company over when calling into podcasts and radio shows. So when you're a friend of this company, naturally we produce a series wherein you host a pajama party in your lingerie.

Missy Hyatt's Pajama Party lasted exactly one episode. Missy was joined by lingerie-clad guest Lacey Von Erich and big pajama-clad guest Amy Lee. The three girls frolicked on a giant bed, drank champagne and beer, and generally misbehaved. As you'd expect with any pajama party, they played truth or dare, grabbed each others' breasts to see who had the firmest, and made prank phone calls. The first call was to The Honky Tonk

Man. Lacey posed as Dixie Carter's secretary and asked Honky if he'd be willing to come on TNA Impact and take a guitar shot from Jeff Jarrett (whom she called Jeff Jer-at as we rehearsed it for a half hour, and then did it again when we shot) for $100. Honky declined, saying he was "committed to WWE" which I thought was curious. Finally WWE does right by their legends, allowing them an excuse not to take shitty gigs.

The second call was to a very pregnant Dawn Marie. Missy told her they were both offered a big money job in England and asked if Dawn would risk the pregnancy and fly over with her. When Dawn vehemently rejected the notion, Missy kept pressing. During the show, I had a large white board behind the cameras where Anthony and I would write notes and questions that I wanted Missy to see while she hosted. When Dawn was protesting, I wrote *Ask Dawn if she would have a C-section on the plane.* As Dawn is wigging out on her pal for suggesting taking the gig, Missy asks if she'd "sit in Section C on the plane." Crickets. It would've been a great moment if viewers could have seen the faces on all 10 people behind the cameras.

New Jack, in town to film our *YouShoot*, entered our set. When I saw him I ran over and asked him to stay hidden. We had a great idea. The show was rolling and the girls on the bed hadn't seen him yet. We had a game of F-Marry-Kill set for the show, so I went to the board and wrote Missy to jump to the game. The choices for the girls were The Honky Tonk Man, The Iron Sheik, and New Jack. They played the game and when Amy Lee said "marry" for New Jack, we sprung him from the other room and he dove onto the bed. I thought the girls were gonna shit. Amy Lee went berserk, she loved it. Lacey probably didn't know who he was. I think she ran and hid her purse.

Might I take a moment to say how proud I was of the set I designed? We placed two short curtain rods on the ceiling on either side of the bed, where we hung lavender and pink fabrics. We dressed the bed in silk sheets. I could have been hired to give The Bunny Ranch a makeover. It looked great. The girls were great. But the show just wasn't *us.* I had reservations from jump-street but once I agreed to go with it I was in all the way. Whether or not you think something will work, you have to put all of your creative energies behind it or it's doomed from the start. This show was well thought out, well written, and well planned. Missy was a great host and Amy Lee was a scream. But after putting it out it was clear that this was ill-

fitting in our collection of work. It's just not what we did. It wasn't Kayfabe Commentaries.

. . .

In 2009 while taping *YouShoot: Sandman* I got a call from James Soubasis asking me if I had a spot for Konnan. During the set breakdown, after learning why "Tod is God," I talked it over with Anthony and we thought this would be a good opportunity to do a lucha-related show. We could use Konnan on *Guest Booker* and talk booking in Mexico. I called James back and said we would do it and I gave him a price. He called back rather quickly and said Konnan was in. He would do our show and then James' Legends of the Ring convention the next day. He also said he needed a deposit. As I mentioned earlier, I don't do deposits. There's just too many ways for a booking to go wrong, even without any shadiness. But for some reason I agreed. To my memory Konnan and Larry Zbyszko's dentist are the only two who ever benefitted from an advance from KC. I sent Konnan $500 and James also paid him a deposit. James also booked his hotel room and flight. He sold tickets to fans who wanted to meet Konnan. We were all set.

Shortly before the date of the shoot and convention, Konnan called James and said he was just tapped for a huge angle in Mexico and needed to do it. He apologized and said he'd come out for James and Terence's next convention six months from then. Well, how could you really be mad? Konnan was really going to be back on TV for this and he did set a date to make good on the New Jersey booking. We said fine, James said fine, Konnan was down with the plan.

Six months later, Konnan's flight is booked, hotel is reserved, deposits still in his hands from the prior date, and fans were ready to meet Konnan at Legends of the Ring. They'd paid and they were looking forward to the photo op and autograph. We were ready to get the *Guest Booker* we were waiting for. It was written and ready to go.

The new date arrived. James was tense as Konnan had stopped returning communications about a week prior. James had sent him the flight info numerous times. There would be nothing he could say if he missed this. James had called him a bunch of times and also emailed the itinerary and

ticket info. No calls that morning though. No emails back. A whole lotta nothing.

The time came and James dispatched a runner to the airport. Gas and parking–there's two more expenses incurred for the Konnan appearance. We all knew that no one named Charles Ashenoff was getting off that plane to play the part of Konnan for us, for Legends of the Ring, or for the fans. We were going to get fucked.

And fucked we were, along with all the aforementioned promoters who had a financial stake in Konnan getting on a plane and keeping his word. Legends of the Ring was out far more than we were, not just because of the plane ticket and hotel, but he had a slot on their Superticket. He was a featured guest and convention-goers expected to meet him, as advertised.

I was pissed off enough for the both of us. It was only $500 to us but the principle and the manner in which it was done was so cunty that it lit me up. To not even try and conjure up an excuse shows a remarkable level of disrespect.

I saw my fair share of thieves and sideways scumbags. I grew up in the city. I worked for a bookie in high school. I watched my Cuban friends' families run the *bolita*, or illegal lottery, in the Latino neighborhood in which I grew up. My gingo ass was very much the minority in West New York. We ran card games all over town–in basements (the Latinos), garages (the gringos), a movie theatre after the final showing let out (Koreans), and even the rear entrance of the city's detective station. The police department was notoriously corrupt and saw a massive takedown of many players on the force in 1999, including the Chief of Police. Look it up. You'll have no wonder why we were running card games for money with nothing more than a "hi guys" as the detectives filtered in and out past us.

Anyway, point is when you rip someone off, steal, just flat out rob a motherfucker with nothing to say for it, you're fair game. Nobody in the neighborhood would ever stand up for you, for fear of being associated with you. Somehow, in an "honor among thieves" kind of way, when you run a scam on someone or you take them through some clever con, the victim is kind of seen as the mark. There's more respect in running a street scam than just ripping someone off. It shows some kind of creds that you can talk money out of someone's pocket or talk on the back end to smooth over a situation. But not when you grab a woman's bag and run. That's some crackhead shit.

Konnan wasn't talking. He wouldn't answer his phone or return a call on the back end. On the front end, there was no con, no used car bullshit. He just didn't get on a plane. This was a purse-snatch.

I began to drop this story into editions of *YouShoot* when his name came up. I defend mine, so I went public. Your company is like your child. I was pissed and the fans and workers should know what went down. Konnan didn't like it when fans of ours began tweeting about it. He would get pissed at *me!* His actions were in no way responsible, of course. It was me shining the light on him that he didn't like. Typical bullshit when someone gets popped and they mad-dog the cop. Shit, you played the game and got tackled in-bounds. 4th down.

We never got any of the money back, nor have I gotten an apology, explanation, or anything requiring a set of balls. I got threatened, which doesn't require balls. That might sound weird to someone who didn't grow up in a city like West New York. The first thing someone does who gets exposed or popped is pop off at the mouth. Easy. Hitting someone? Easy. And stupid. You go to jail. I have seen big players publicly squash a beef with someone because it's the right thing to do. Those are the cats that got respect.

In the years since this went down, the funny thing is I have worked with so many people that are close to Konnan that have paid me massive respect. From Insane Clown Posse to Vampiro to Teddy Hart, guys in Konnan's inner circle have paid me wonderful compliments in private. Either they have poor character judgment or there's more to Konnan than what he has shown me. I hope to find out. I still want to film his *Guest Booker.*

Someone else who was booked to do a show that didn't was Colt Cabana. I'd been told he was an indie worker with a good sense of humor. He was posting skits on YouTube and exploring the lighter side of wrestling so I figured he'd likely be a good fit for *YouShoot.* I called him and he was booked. We made the formal announcement on our site and began soliciting questions from fans.

Scott, Colt's real name, (sorry I can't call a grown man Colt, it's a character) called me the next day and said he was up all night, uncomfortable with the idea of doing *YouShoot.*

"Why?" I asked. "We won't make you look bad, everyone had fun on the show." Sometimes people not so familiar with us might think we are

looking to make them uncomfortable or make fun of *them.* That wasn't to be the case with Scott.

"I know, I just don't think it would be right for me," he insisted.

"I don't agree. You have a good sense of humor I actually think you'd be a great fit."

And then he said what he really meant.

"I just saw some clips and saw your previous guests and I don't think I'm in their category." Oh my. He never said, "I'm better than them" so I don't want to insinuate that's what he meant. But what did he mean? What *could* he have meant?

Desperate for an answer to this I looked at the guests we'd had on *YouShoot* so far, the very people with which he didn't feel he should be associated. We had a pretty varied slate of workers on the show to that point. What was so different about Scott from the prior *YouShoot* guests? What could he have meant?

Well, he could have meant he and the Honky Tonk Man had very different Intercontinental Title runs. Couldn't he? Or that they sold out a different number of 20,000 seat arenas? Could he have meant that he and Kevin Sullivan have booked for a different number of major promotions during prime time ratings wars? Or could he possibly have meant that he and Sabu were viewed differently the world over for their workrate? Could he have meant that he and Jim Cornette had a different number of jobs in creative for a different number of major federations? Who knows?

I was pissed at the irresponsible cancellation of this booking and moreso for the fucked up reasoning given. It was dismissive and it demeaned our show, in my view. A few dick jokes never hurt anyone. I double-checked my iPhone again to make sure it wasn't Nick Bockwinkel on the line. The show is a little lighthearted and silly, but the guests have fun. Guess I'm lowbrow. We can't all be doing God's work and pretending we are being punched.

I had to decide how I would pose this publicly. I had to make a statement to close the submission window and tell fans the show wasn't happening. I put it blankly to Scott when I was on the phone with him. Or maybe it was Lou Thesz? Sounded like Scott, though.

"Well, what do you want to release as the reason?" I asked.

"I don't know. Can you say we had a conflict with the date or the booking wasn't finalized?"

Right. Either option meant that *we* were premature in making a guest announcement. Not gonna happen. We both agreed to issue separate statements, with no real smoking gun as to why the show was cancelled. Which is good, because I still had no fucking idea.

My statement:

"The passion with which you the fans have involved yourselves in the YouShoot series has been the singular, most crucial component in the series' success. It is precisely this passion that deposited literally hundreds of questions and videos in our inbox and social networks for this most recent YouShoot. And it is this passion we so greatly value and respect. That makes it wrenching for us to essentially toss all of that in the garbage can.

*The edginess of Y*ouShoot *is not for everyone, and we understand this when we sign guests. Alas, I could not salvage this show, and by proxy, the expectations and work of the wrestling fans we so greatly value. For that we apologize. As always (KC) will learn from each and every experience and will be more judicious with our guest selection."*

Scott weighed in with this:

"I'm sorry to inform everyone that I'm unable to partake in Kayfabe Commentaies' YouShoot *series. I do strongly urge everyone to continue to support the great products and material that Kayfabe Commentaries puts out for the wonderful fans of our business."*

And that was that. No harm no foul.

A few years later we were looking to buy time on wrestling podcasts for live reads. I reached out to Scott since he has a podcast. I know he has one because I listened to the episode where his guest was The Honky Tonk Man. Strangely, there was no discussion about why Scott felt Honky wasn't in the same category as he.

I emailed him and asked for the rate card so we might do the thing that all free programming is dependent on, the thing that is the ultimate compliment to a program, the thing that makes an advertiser the *be all end all* in the hearts of content providers–give them money for an ad.

Scott was "ok with advertising" and wouldn't take our ad.

As stiff as that whole thing may have sounded, I do have to confess something. I feel a simpatico with Scott Colton. Our paths were similar in that we took a very basic thing, the interview, and had to find a way to bend it to fit into this funhouse of mirror mazes and tilted rooms. He showed that wrestling and the characters within can fit in the podcast world, and we changed the game in shoot-style entertainment. We both sort of became poster boys for the respective mediums.

I have credits for a couple hundred major motion pictures and TV shows and have worked with Academy Award winning directors. I have directed national TV commercials. Oddly, the thing I am most proud of in wrestling is having so perfectly tapped into the intense passions of a small niche of fans to the degree that they have become full-blown addicts of our programming. They've named themselves the Kayfabe Commandos. They hop the fence (please don't do this anymore) at Titan Tower and send us pictures of themselves holding signs in front of the building proclaiming us the originators of their WWE Network content. (You're all correct, of course. But don't do something to get arrested.) They bring Kayfabe Commentaries signs and get them on WWE RAW in the first row. It's the Deadheads, the KISS Army, and Stern show circa 1985, all rolled into one.

Dicky moments with an individual worker here or there are to be expected. Coming from the legit entertainment world steeled me to divas and attitude. It doesn't frazzle me, I'm good at handling it. Universally though, I found that in movies, TV, or even pro wrestling, the bigger the star, the cooler they are. They have nothing to prove.

From the directors I've worked for, to the stars in the shows, to the wrestlers I've hired, the biggest names in both worlds were fantastic to work with–Robert Duvall (amazingly respectful as a director), Bruce Willis (either your cousin or the biggest movie star in the world, you can't tell), Tom Hanks (smart, quiet, funny), Antonio Banderas (humble and so talented), Bruno Sammartino (honorable beyond words), Harley Race (polite, respectful, and willing to do the job he's hired for), Kevin Nash (once you get the respect, he's all yours), Philip Seymour Hoffman (was directed by him, so brilliant and shy, humble, full of wisdom; only needs to say 3 or 4 words and you know what he wants), John Waters (hilarious, wise, and much more normal than you'd think), Jonathan Demme (warm and soft spoken; if he hired you, you became like family).

Then there were brief encounters of another kind. We had a show called *Wrestling's Most…* which was a countdown clip show with short talking head soundbytes by workers as they counted down a list related to something in wrestling. It was cancelled but it was one of my favorite shows, along with *My Side of Story*. (Starting to see any pattern here?) Anyway, we would ask talent at conventions to run in while they're in between signings or appearances, and count down a few topics. It took about 20 minutes and I shoved a hundred bucks in their hand for their time.

I always ask their booking agent or promoter to ask the talent beforehand so I can schedule the talent in advance. We have the set ready and they literally just have to run in and sit down and we are rolling in 5 minutes. Well, Road Warrior Animal accepted the 20 minute, $300 per-hour gig and walked down the hallway with me making small talk. We sat down, he was wired for sound, I gave him a release to sign and he starts huffing and puffing. He informs me, and the crew present, that the $100 is insulting, reminding me that he's both a Hall of Famer and a best selling author.

I was speechless! How could I have erred and asked Stephen King (350 million copies of 54 novels), to take time away from sitting in the hotel pub for 20 minutes for only $100? Certainly he could have used this time to pen his next tome. I felt terribly, especially as Mr. Animal mentioned nothing of this insult during the walk to the room and the application of his microphone. I was quite taken off-guard, and here's how I handle busy, New York Times best selling authors who invoke their opus *The Road Warriors: Danger, Death, and the Rush of Wrestling* in an effort to illustrate their importance far outweighs their agreement with me:

"I'm sorry Joe. We will unwire you, just hand me back the money and you can go."

You can watch him on season 1 of *Wrestling's Most.*

The epilogue to that story is that he apologized on his way out, and I also bought him dinner a couple of years later. I'm sure he didn't remember doing that show. I was with my guest for the weekend, Jim Cornette, on a break from shooting his series *Back to the Territories*, details to come, and Joe was alone. Corny waved him over and the three of us had a nice dinner. I talked with Joe about his son James who is doing very well in the NFL. It was a fine time and when the check came I grabbed Joe's without his knowledge and paid it with ours. He was very appreciative and couldn't

have been a nicer guy. Maybe that day three years ago taught him a goddamn lesson. Or, more than likely, we just got him on a bad day.

. . .

Sometimes when a bunch of wrestlers are around at a convention we will send someone from our set with a camera to try and get questions for an upcoming *YouShoot.* It's always funny when a worker can reference an inside joke to the guest, prompting them to recount the story on *YouShoot.* One day at a convention, we sent a couple of our guys out to the ballroom to grab some quick questions for someone's upcoming *YouShoot*. It may have been The Iron Sheik's.

Most guys were happy to lean over the table and say something funny. Most people, except Percy Pringle, aka Paul Bearer. My guys explained the show and asked if he had a question when, shocked and offended, he balked loudly.

"What? For *free???!!!"* Mind you my guys were standing in front of an empty table.

"Um yeah," the lucky KC soldier replied.

"No!"

They moved on, getting video from other workers, including the wrestler sitting right beside Percy's table. As that wrestler had fun and asked a very funny question, Percy looked on like he was watching a Pomeranian being raped by a bison. My guys thanked the compliant worker. And Percy.

We have a rather remarkable record for helping workers look great on our shows. It's part of that trust I referenced. We could certainly make someone look like shit with editing and the questions we choose. The talent are generally thrilled with the end product and express interest in working with us again. It's something that keeps us at the top of everyone's list to work with.

Most shows need minimal editing, but we do edit them. Shows should be tight and move along at a nice pace and in a linear fashion. If it didn't happen on the set, it will happen in the edit. Sometimes it's color correction or using an effect to tweak the exposure on camera 2 so it matches camera 1's shot. We can do almost anything in editing. You never see it, and that's the way it should be. A show should be visually unencumbered by anything that takes you out of the show.

While we are on the subject of editing we should talk about Marty Jannetty's edition of *Breaking Kayfabe.* I enjoyed Marty and I think he was very honest in his edition of the show, and I appreciated that. *Breaking Kayfabe* is subtitled "Part, therapy, part interview, all shoot." It's a serious show, for the most part, where I delve into the personal lives of the workers because they are infinitely more interesting than most of their wrestling personas. The show's tagline is "They're people" because it's easy to forget they're not the cartoon superheroes they portray on TV. They have real lives and many led painful ones.

Marty was on *Breaking Kayfabe* and we talked about everything, from his first sexual escapade which occurred far too young, to his badly damaged ankle, to his self-diagnosed A.D.D. I appreciated his honesty but good lord the damn thing was impossible to follow. I am not exaggerating when I say Marty's conversation is like a ping-pong game during an earthquake. I don't think he was on anything. We were accused of letting Marty "use" when people saw the trailer. Of course no one who posted these comments was actually there, or else you'd know that Marty did nothing at all in the way of drink or drugs in our presence.

It's just, I assume, this A.D.D. of which he spoke. I'm not a doctor, I'm not diagnosing him. I'm just telling you what he said to me. Marty might start a story about, say, Shawn Michaels and he in a hotel in Saginaw, Michigan. He starts the story at the 10-minute mark of the show. In the middle of the story he mentions Jim Ross, and then begins to tell a story about Ross. Conversation continues, I ask questions, he answers. Then at the 17-minute mark, Shawn comes back up and he goes back to the original story in Saginaw. Then in telling that story he references a hotel and gets off the Shawn thing to tell a quick story about that Ho-Jo he was at. Then he adds something to the Jim Ross story from before. Then we are discussing his childhood until the 28-minute mark, when he goes back and finishes up the Shawn Michaels story. I could not get a concise answer or completion to a story in a linear fashion.

Imagine the editing job that lay before me. If we put this show out in its original form it would have been unwatchable, literally. You would have been as exhausted watching it as I was conducting it. So, first and foremost is the consideration of entertainment value for the viewer. Secondly, if this came out as jumbled as it was in real time, I would have made Marty look very bad. I went to great lengths, painful editing sessions, to make Marty

look good. It's been a long time since I've seen it, I can't even remember if he looked "good." Let's say it took nothing less than editing magic not to leave him looking bad.

I was trimming a ton of non-sequiturs and cutting and pasting parts of stories back up to where they were being told before the next distraction. In the end, I thought I did an amazing job. If I showed you the raw footage beside the final release you would give me an Emmy on the spot. I guess it wouldn't be an Emmy. Maybe a Shooty.

This became a product I was comfortable releasing. It was tightened up, and somewhat linear. In the show, Marty seemed like a very sympathetic character, which was my goal. I verbally expressed shock that WWE had done nothing to help him repair his ankle that was badly damaged, no doubt in part, due to what he did in WWE rings for years.

The show was released and Marty called me soon after watching his DVD. He wasn't happy with it.

"Hey man," he said, "can I get a do-over on that?" I paused, not realizing this was a middle school dodge ball game.

"A do-over?" I asked.

"Yeah man, I can do better than that, and I won't be as nervous next time. I wanna tell the stories but this time I will be more clear with them."

The show was already out and with slow sales I wasn't going to invest more time releasing a strange sequel that covered the same thing that was released weeks ago. There was just no way we could be expected to do a full setup and basically reshoot a title that was underperforming as it was. I think it's absolutely unreasonable to expect that of us.

I offered Marty a spot on our Facebook page where he could write whatever he wanted about the interview. We weren't shooting it again and this seemed a fair compromise so Marty didn't feel he was without a voice.

I assured him that he was an interesting guest and he was overthinking this. But if he insisted, why not write something and we'll post it.

Well he didn't take the offer and called and texted me a lot over the next few days. He still wanted his do-over but his tactic to get it was changing. Now he was going to say *we* did something wrong. Depending on which day it was and what the weather was, our crime varied.

First it was that I was a terrible host. He said I was "unprofessional for insulting" him at the end when I said I was exhausted and he was an

“exhausting individual.” On the set he had no problem. We were joking and cordial. Nothing after the show. Now, suddenly, I was unprofessional.

Then he went the family route. He mentioned his brother on the show and said now his family was unhappy about some revelations and his brother didn’t wish to be mentioned. He didn’t give his brother’s name, address, and social security number. There was nothing wrong with saying his brother was there when Marty found Christ. *Marty* decided to say anything and everything that came out of his mouth on that show. We didn’t write what he said.

Then he made the accusation that made me explode. I told him the extent to which I had to edit the show, originally so he’d be confident that the shit-show that went on tape was not what would be released. I told him this in an effort to make him feel secure that it would turn out fine. Well, he used that against me and said he knew we edited him badly and did a hatchet job to make him look poor.

Holy shit, did I go nuts. *Now* I was being unprofessional. I know that I *should* have said, “Sorry that’s how you feel.” Actually, I’m sure I said that a few times in the days-long conversations I was forced to have and say the same things over and over. But not that night.

“I fucking edited that goddamn show so you *wouldn’t* look bad and you’re gonna accuse *me?* The fucking guy that spent hours cutting this so you didn’t look like shit!”

I went on and on. Very over the top, but I’d had it. He should be kissing my ass for what I turned that show into, and I let him know. I guess my mouth wasn’t in alignment with the born-again doctrine because he let me know that he don’t let no man cuss him and I’d better “watch my back” which, after editing for two weeks straight, was better than watching his *Breaking Kayfabe.*

In retrospect I guess my temper got the best of me and he finally found the button to push. I should have rolled over and turned out the light but I felt the need to defend myself. I wish I were more Christ-like. Marty and I left it in a very bad place. I wish we hadn’t.

A few days later some alleged wrestler I never heard of who was a friend of Marty’s posted on Facebook that Marty was screwed by us. He knew for a fact that we edited Marty’s words to make him look bad. He went on some unintelligible diatribe that Marty thought was gospel, no doubt. Sometimes you just can’t win, folks. Wonder if Marty and Buff Bagwell are

friends? They can bond over their desire to hit me. They should form a tag team called The Ingrates.

Someone who we have constantly been asked about is Jake “The Snake” Roberts. Jake is one of those rare guests that would work on a few of our different series. Jake would generate a ton of questions if he were to do a *YouShoot.* He worked atop the WWE for years and would be amazing on an edition of *Timeline: The History of WWE*. And with the personal life Jake has lived, he would make for a spellbinding episode of *Breaking Kayfabe.*

The latter is the direction we decided to go when the time came to get Jake. We reached out to DDP who we knew from his edition of *YouShoot.* At the time, Jake was traveling with Diamond Dallas Page. DDP had taken in Jake and pledged to put him through his personal gain program, *DDP Yoga*, to clean up Jake and get him healthy. They were living together in Page’s house and shooting a documentary about this transformation as well. DDP booked Jake for us when they were in New Jersey for *Wrestlemania* weekend when the big WWE annual show was at Met Life Stadium in 2013.

Jake’s life was an open book in the mainstream, wrestling documentary *Beyond the Mat.* The cameras chronicled his struggles with his daughter, addiction, and a dark and troubled family history. Jake’s life, simply put, was tragic and ugly. People know Jake as the struggling addict, with reported behavior, on some accounts, bordering on depraved. But based on our research we thought that the tale of family abuse that would emerge would almost offer some crude explanation for Jake’s need to flush out those memories with chemicals. It would be an important show.

Jake was picked up at his hotel by Brian from our crew and brought to our set. Jake came in and we exchanged some pleasantries for the first time, as we’d never met. Jake signed the release, complained about the money DDP arranged for the show, and sat down. I told him he could take his complaints about pay to his agent DDP, which he jokingly said he would be doing.

We started rolling and I led off with the story about Buff Bagwell in Queens. Jake had never worked with us, but was instrumental in helping us that night. We had a laugh over it at the top of the show. Some rapport, things going well.

That was not to last. Things would get dark very quickly in Newark, NJ and it had nothing to do with the weather. I told Jake I was fascinated by the

“wrestling family” and how that dynamic worked. I’d covered this a little with Larry “the Axe” Hennig, Sabu, and Lanny Poffo. As a product of a family that kayfabed no one at the dinner table, I was interested by how pro wrestling families operated and I told Jake so.

Jake turned more serious. He mentioned he didn’t want to talk about his family. That wasn’t going to work for us, obviously. The whole fucking show was predicated on his talking about his family and the horrors within. I had no questions on my index cards about the DDT, Jake’s finishing move. This was about Jake, the man, and what makes him who he is. I told Jake that *this* is what the show is about, and nothing else. He wasn’t having it. He protested, flatly saying he wouldn’t do it. I was telling him that this wasn’t anything that wasn’t already broadcast in *Beyond the Mat.* He didn’t care.

“I *can’t* do this,” he said. “I will *not* talk about my family. I’m not fucking doing it.” Again and again.

He stood to leave. I stayed seated and tried to get him to take a breath and come outside and have a cigarette. It’s funny, I remember I kept going back to “come outside and have a smoke with me.” I hadn’t had a cigarette in eight years to that point. I just wanted Jake to spend ten minutes alone with me. We hadn’t had a second to speak before he walked, apparently unknowingly, into a lion’s den. I hadn’t had a chance to show him we were safe, that I was safe.

He stood there refusing even the smoke. It was clear that this was over.

“Okay, Jake,” I relented. “I’m sorry to have wasted your time. Just drop the money and I’ll have you taken back to your hotel.” He did, and he was gone. Truthfully, I couldn’t be angry with him. I did tell Page the premise of the show but he clearly didn’t communicate that to Jake. I guess Jake thought he was coming on to talk about wrestling, and he probably felt ambushed.

Making matters more annoying was the fact that because this was *Wrestlemania* weekend right near us in New Jersey, we’d had a bunch of shoots planned and we were uploading behind the scenes footage throughout the day. As part of that coverage, we uploaded the opening few minutes of Jake’s *Breaking Kayfabe*, just before it collapsed. With that having been established, I now had to address the fact that the show fans had just gotten peek of would never come to be. Anthony rolled a handheld camera while the set was being broken down behind me and I was undoing

my tie. I explained that Jake was uncomfortable talking about the issues in the show and we agreed to shut it down and part ways.

It was weird, but I thought fans might be mad at us. Instead, comments were being posted saying that we had class for doing that. Believe me, I'd much rather have been put over for doing a great show, rather than a great cancellation.

Fifteen minutes or so after Jake was taken away, Dallas was ringing my phone.

"What happened, bro?" he asked.

"What happened was Jake thought he was here to talk about the armbar, and when I asked about his family he quit. I told you the premise of the show was talking about his personal life. Didn't you tell him?"

He was unsure. He may have forgotten, he said. He said Jake is in a very fragile place in his recovery and this might have set him off. He'd come so far. DDP was actually afraid that right now, due to the altercation, Jake might be in danger. Page said we could try again when Jake was a little stronger. I never asked. Next time I think we will talk about headlocks.

Earlier I made reference to *YouShoot: Chyna* which, in our minds, was set to be the wildest, most honest, rip roarin' edition of the show. Chyna was always outspoken and had burned a bridge or two, so we were sure she was coming to shoot. She'd dated some very high-profile wrestlers and appeared on MTV's celebrity reality show *The Surreal Life*. Her struggles with addiction landed her on VH1's *Celebrity Rehab*. She was a big name with lots of crossover. This would be huge.

She'd also just signed with Vivid Video to perform in their high profile adult films. This was set to be wild. So much so, I actually called a meeting with Craig and Anthony and said that I thought this would raise the bar of debauchery so much I didn't think I'd be able to host this show and even this series any longer. I wanted to step down from *YouShoot* and let someone do this who would be better suited, someone with a wild and unchained image. It wasn't me in my fucking tie.

They convinced me to do the show and just see how it went. Chyna was all over the press, on TMZ and all the entertainment shows, so there was no way this would turn out bad, even if I was a fly in the ointment during the show. I could decide after this. I thought about it hard, and then reluctantly agreed.

Joanie, Chyna's real name, was flying in from Los Angeles, which is a significant flight. She was also delayed on the tarmac for quite a while. We got word she'd be late. We were used to that. Besides, we shot Tony Atlas' edition of *YouShoot* earlier that day and I was exhausted both from the discussion (and video) of Tony having his face walked on by women, and hearing him repeatedly tell the bigger guys on the crew that they had nice eyes. I don't get Tony. That's why he's the perfect *YouShoot* guest.

Chyna arrived at last, shortly after midnight. The glamorous star of XXX film walked into our shoot wearing a baseball cap, hoodie over her head, and carrying a dog. She was exhausted. Hey, let's roll those cameras, boys!

This show sat still like a languid water buffalo. Joanie wasn't uncooperative or an asshole or anything. There was just nothing interesting in her stories or her outlook. When an interview is going like that I have to start to try and crowbar some shit in there to get reactions or stories. I'm telling you...*nothing* worked. I hoped she fucked better than she interviewed or else Vivid Video had just made the same mistake I did.

I thought the whole Vivid thing was tragic. I sat across from Joanie as she talked on *YouShoot* of loneliness and suicide attempts, and then talked about her deal to do pornos as a life-saver. That industry is loaded with tales of lonely souls who turn there for love and are used up and left emptier than before. When I heard her positioning this as "the answer," I knew trouble was coming. She was inspired to change her life, for sure. She didn't find it in God. She didn't find it in a child's love. She found it in porno.

On April 20, 2016 Joanie was found dead, having overdosed on a cocktail of prescription medication and alcohol. Sadness was expressed by all, though not shock.

8. Still Shootin’

The *YouShoot* phenomenon rolled on and became the most talked about shoot program with hundreds and hundreds of shared clips on YouTube with millions of views. Fan submissions flooded our inboxes for each edition we shot and the show was becoming a permanent fixture in the wrestling landscape. Fans and workers alike knew the famous, benchmark moments. Asking the size of Batista’s dick became an industry catchphrase, unfortunately.

How in the hell did that even get started? That’s just one of those things. It was such an outlandish question that Anthony chose to put in the show and I chose to ask. Viewers took it upon themselves to repeat the question to every guest in every edition of the show. The question took on a life of its own, showing up all over the place, being referenced by workers on Twitter. We never got an answer to the question.

Those benchmark *YouShoot* moments were being played in locker rooms all over the world. Workers know that if they light it up on *YouShoot,* they will be brought to life as a digital image on wrestlers’ iPhones from WWE to TNA. When Drew McIntyre was still in WWE, he and the Connecticut crew were in town for a pay-per-view and Anthony and I met him and Hornswoggle for a bite and a drink at their hotel pub. He mentioned a particularly grueling European tour they were on recently, dubbed the “Destructa tour.” The reference comes from Tony Atlas’ *YouShoot*. Tony

has a very unique pronunciation of words and when asked to describe the cocaine of the 80s he thought and said “destruca.” Ladies and gentlemen, tonight the word *destructive* will be played by *destructa.*

Well on the WWE European tour, the workers were all fans of Tony’s hilarious, if not partially unintelligible, appearance on the show. Road-weary and run down, on occasion one worker would look at over while lacing his boots and catch the eye of another.

“Destructa,” is all they would say, in reference to their collective overworked condition. It was uttered so much it became dubbed the “Destructa tour.”

The original *YouShoot* logo was a parody of the YouTube logo, since our show relied heavily on fan videos. We had absolutely no idea the series would take off and to what degree. We didn’t know the *company* would take off like it did. We started doing this because we enjoyed it and we were the best at it. The fact that *YouShoot* had become our signature series was not in the initial blueprints. Not even sure we had any. But the logo so closely resembling that of YouTube would become problematic.

For a short time we began to offer rentals of our shows on YouTube. As we went live with our different series, we noticed that they weren’t ever activating the *YouShoots* for rent. We made a formal inquiry and were told that depictions of logos and trademarks with similarities too close to that of any Google owned properties would not be activated. We knew they meant the *YouShoot* logo.

Parody is protected under copyright law. If you are clearly spoofing a trademark then you are allowed to use it. But it has to clearly be parody. Where one would get in trouble is if they’re passing off a product *as* that trademark that’s being emulated, or suggesting that it’s in some way endorsed or related. When *YouShoot* first launched, it was clearly parody. But the show had taken on a life of its own and defined a format in our genre. A case could now possibly be made that we were using the YouTube brand’s familiarity to confuse people into watching the show. Both YouTube and *YouShoot* had grown and I didn’t want to risk the potential conflict.

After 19 feature length editions of the show it was time to rebrand it. If we had to reinvent the logo, we might as well remake the whole show. I thought it was time for a facelift and some work on the structure. *YouShoot* was much more fast-paced and edgy than the original format of the show

lent itself to. I felt it should move fast, with shorter chapters, some cut-aways to stand-up segments against a green screen for visual variety. I always like the segments they used to air on Fox's NFL pregame show where Bradshaw, Johnson, and Long would go over to a turf area of the set and simulate something on the field. One week it was Coach Johnson and Terry Bradshaw acting out an exchange that could, and maybe did, happen respectively as a quarterback and a coach. So I wanted to grab something like that. Instead of me and Tammy Sytch sitting there *talking* about playing the wrestler name game on a long road trip, let's shoot a segment through the magic of special effects where she and I are in the car *playing* the game. Rather than ask Nash what it was like to get a finish from Pat Paterson, let's make a locker room set and have Nash give me a finish *as* Pat. The segments broke up the show and paced it faster.

Music would move the show also. It was time to update the theme song. I contacted musician Daron Beck who had written us offering to score our programs. I put him to the test and asked him to take a crack at redoing the original Kevin Macleod composition as much more uptempo, with a touch of Ramones-esque punk. We went back and forth a bit until it had the crunchy, muddy, sound I wanted with some flange effects thrown in to keep it contemporary. I eventually scribbled out the new logo on an iPad after messing around on it for a couple of weeks. We had a cool, new package for *YouShoot* and Tammy Sytch would be the first guest on the new show.

Except I got a call shortly before our shoot date saying Tammy was in a bad way, and literally packing in the background and heading to rehab. Her boyfriend at the time said she wanted me to know she'd be all cleaned up and ready to go in a month or so. That was fine with me. Tammy went away, made some headlines in doing do, and we were able to get some advance press for her *YouShoot*.

When Tammy came out of rehab we knocked out a great edition of the show, where we talked about what everyone expected, but also a rather unexpected revelation that she'd been sleeping with Davey Boy Smith as well as Shawn Michaels. That one lit up the Internet rather quickly. Davey's daughter, Georgia, made a public statement regarding Tammy's assertion on *YouShoot*, denying it happened. There's no proof it happened and no proof it didn't. More wrestling lore, I suppose.

Isn't that the business I'm in, anyway? I've read fans' posts that take issue with a wrestler's version or recollection of past events. Is it a lie

detector we need? Or maybe a star's version of events is far more interesting than the neutral, lukewarm truth.

As the *YouShoot* thing kept growing, it was interesting to see who in the business was actually a fan, closet or not. It was becoming our identity. I'd be spotted as the "*YouShoot* guy," and we were sometimes referred to as the "*YouShoot* guys" when we were talked about. Workers would start a show with us, whether it was a *YouShoot* or a *Timeline* or anything else, and eventually there would be a "hey that was *you* guys?" moment.

Former ECW announcer and WWE office guy Joey Styles, real name Giuseppe Bonsignore, clearly a Jew, was "very familiar" with my work, as he said to me when meeting him for the first time. He came into our set to chat with one of our guests while he was in town at a convention. We said a quick "hi" and I got the aforementioned "I'm very familiar with your work." On his way out I said something I realized might be dicky after the fact. I wished him well and told him he was welcome on any of our shows when he was "done up in Connecticut." I wasn't wishing him career misfortune. I was serious. It was a very matter of fact thing. From the way he laughed and kind of went "wow, okay!" I realized how it sounded. I know it may have seemed crass, but shit, he wasn't Steve Lombardi. His time was coming.

As we moved toward having celebrity hosted programming in place of me as of late, Joey was one of the names we had on the short list to develop a show for. We did it with great success with *Back to the Territories with Jim Cornette* and we thought Joey would be a great host if we had the right, unique vehicle for him. Joey is very smart so to have him sit there and talk about ECW for two hours would really be a waste of his potential. Plus I already hosted the *Timeline: The History of ECW* series and he did a bunch of tepid, safe shit for WWE about ECW, in their most obligatory way.

We thought we could do better than that for Joey. We wanted to use Joey Styles, but *today's* Joey Styles. The kid screaming "Oh my God!" into the mic as New Jack cut someone's throat with a machete has grown and lived through the hardscrabble, South Philly revolution. He was the journalist for the federation on the fringes of wrestling, and sometimes the law. How can we use *that guy?*

We worked hard and came up with a great show that delved into wrestling myths and scandals, the darker moments and, perhaps, the stretches of truth. Joey could sit in the dimly lit, simulated crime beat

writer's office and go back in time and explore the darker alleyways of pro wrestling. That's Joey Styles reporting today. It's really perfect for him. And it's copywritten, WWE.

A year or so passed and Joey was, in fact, gone from WWE. I saw him at a convention and went up to talk to him about working with us. I wasn't going to go into detail. It was a first date–I might sweet-talk a bit, maybe grab a tit. His seemed to be growing.

We exchanged hellos and I brought up a very general, "time to work with us yet?" To which he nearly gagged.

"What? No way," he laughed. "Not *your* stuff."

"What do you mean?"

"All that 'ho bag' stuff and Batista's dick, I'm not doing that stuff." He was serious. I mean, he was laughing as he told me I was basically Larry Flint, but he was serious.

"Joey, that's *YouShoot*," I said. "That's *one series*, we have like five right now."

"Well, that's all I ever see," he said.

Was I really going to go through the litany of shows we have? Was I gonna whip out the Bruno, Harley, Jerry Jarrett, Gary Hart references? I wanted to send him DVDs. Joey gave me his email as a concession, leaving it somewhere like "okay send some stuff." I think we traded a couple of emails and that was it. The *YouShoot* monster had worked against us.

I was doing an interview on a podcast and the guest just before me was Kevin Gill. KG is the man behind Juggalo Championship Wrestling and closely tied to the rap group Insane Clown Posse. Months before this I saw on Twitter that the group tweeted that they thought we were the shit. That was a very cool moment and we tweeted back that they should be on *YouShoot*. Though we got a "like" from them and many, many fans of theirs replied that they wanted it to happen, we didn't hook up at that time. Now, while waiting for my segment to start on the podcast, KG was ending his interview. Off the air we spoke on the phone for the first time and he confirmed that ICP were indeed fans. I told him we have to hook up an appearance on *YouShoot.* It would be the perfect show for them.

This time KG and I kept at it, trying to line up dates when the guys weren't touring and would be able to shoot. They also had a TV show called *Insane Clown Posse Theatre* on Fuse which shot in New York, so that might work to our advantage, being in Jersey. Finally, they were

booked at a wrestling show right here in New Jersey. I jumped on it, they accepted the gig, and I arranged their stay and our shoot through KG. *YouShoot: ICP* was going to happen.

Prior to the shoot I was talking with KG on the phone and he explained that Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope are all about the vibe. They can feel the situation out and if the environment is spiritually on the level, they are at max comfort and they give you their all. I assured him that wouldn't be an issue. We are all very genuine and we know what we're doing with production. They will be comfortable.

When the day came and J and Shaggy came in with KG and the group's manager, it was a love fest. Violent J came right over to me. "Yo, biiiig fan, for real," he said. I told him I saw that tweet months ago and I swore I'd make it happen. We sat around and chatted for a few while the finishing touches were put on the set. We rolled camera and they knocked it out of the park. Their stories were great, they were funny as hell and they had a good time with the *YouShoot* format, answering dozens and dozens of questions from the fans.

During a break, the fellas confirmed that the show was working because of the vibe in the room. Everyone was chill and that's why it was jelling. If you're looking to hire ICP for anything, work on your vibe, son. That's what it's all about.

The guys themselves are so genuine and, it's a total cliché but there's a reason for that, they're "regular guys." Joe and Joey (real names) were crazy wrestling fans that wanted to get into the business and tried before their music even hit. They were trained in Detroit and came up the hard way. Watch their *YouShoot* and you'll see their whole story.

I look at the story of their music career and I relate because they had to *create* their own market. They were not "discovered" by some mega label. There was no big, million dollar marketing campaign to introduce them to the world when they were 21 years old. They didn't win a fucking TV contest and get a contract. They worked the streets with their demo cassette tapes. They created the trademark clown images and the entire wicked clown personas, not unlike KISS did with their characters in the late 70s. They never compromised and kept theatre as a part of their special sauce. ICP has a flavor, a point of view. It smells like something and that isn't easy to create.

I can relate to a couple of cats that shoved their way into a market with a unique concept and just cranked out product all the time. I can relate to a couple of business partners that put their heads down and charged through the criticism, industry conventions, and did what they did, over and over, getting better and better. I may not be a Juggalo, but I can relate very deeply to Joe and Joey's journey.

Guys like ICP, Honky, Cornette, Waltman, DDP, and many more of our guests were perfect for *YouShoot* due in part to their willingness to be honest. There's a state of grace in complete honesty. It's pretty tough for someone to really take issue if you can look them in the eye and say, "I was being honest. Would I be better if I were a liar?"

There's a formula to our programming that's invisible when it's working and glaring when not. It's simply a matter of *right guest for right show.* I know, rocket science. But it seems easier than it is. Unless you know someone quite well, how do you know if someone will have great recall for *Timeline: The History of WWE?* How do you know they'll be fearless for *YouShoot?* How do you know they'll really open up for *Breaking Kayfabe?* You don't. So unless you keep working with the same people again and again, as a producer you're going to have to go with your gut and take a leap of faith.

One big help for us are the shoot companies that are the first to get a guest, or have worked with someone prior to us. The other companies function for us like the minor leagues, or AAA baseball clubs. We are able to watch the players and decide whether to draft them, or pass. So, if a potential guest has some tape out there already, I can look at that and consider it alongside the other factors that go into making the decision. Other than their general entertainment value, it's helpful if there is some interest from the public in the guest. When I say public, I mean shoot market public. If you're gauging the general public, you can fall flat on your ass, because the general public isn't buying shoot interviews, period.

YouShoot: Chyna was the perfect violation of all of these rules. We were still a little young to the game and went by an understandably conventional thought process. She was on TMZ, an MTV series, and a VH1 series. She was back in the news, having signed with Vivid Video to star in adult films. She was a controversial figure with the added bonus of mainstream attention and crossover opportunity. It would seem that this was a no-brainer.

Looking back now I can see the problems. We just hadn't seen all the situations and configurations back then. Firstly, mainstream entertainment and wrestling shoot programming have absolutely no common intersection. We could have produced *YouShoot: Tom Cruise* and it wouldn't have sold. That would be *wrong guest, for the wrong show.* Tom Cruise isn't a shoot interview guest and even if he were it certainly wouldn't be on *YouShoot*. *You're* not watching it, right? Exactly. You didn't watch *YouShoot: Chyna* either.

The other part of this equation is that Chyna herself was not a good guest for this interview. She wasn't particularly engaging. She didn't have that charisma. She was successful in wrestling because of her physique and her willingness to mix it up with the guys. It also didn't hurt being put with DX, the hottest wrestling faction on TV at the time. But she didn't exactly come through the TV screen with her magnetism. They didn't even let her do promos on TV back then. She was mute and I doubt that was a character decision. When you open your mouth and can talk like Ric Flair they don't make you a mute.

So conventional wisdom was our pitfall there. Now, Insane Clown Posse was a totally different story. Their *YouShoot* did well and it was a great show. ICP also had crossover appeal, as they'd sold like 10 million records as rap artists. They were on TV. The big difference is that they had *loads* of charisma and appeal. They were honest, funny, and unpredictable. They were the quintessential *YouShoot* guests, so much so that the haters who were flaming us when we announced the show all had to eat crow. I can't tell you the number of posts and reviews I saw that started with, "I was sure I was going to hate this but…" They won everyone over. They were that good. That show was a winner because they were the *right guests, for the right show.* They wouldn't work for *Timeline* or *Guest Booker.*

As I mentioned before, sometimes you have to just listen to your gut. I'd never met Teddy Long before and his *YouShoot* turned out to be great. We took a chance, but his age and the era in which he worked were a bit of a tip off. Teddy was done with WWE, had a great run, and wasn't going to hem and haw when asked a question just to keep a bridge back to Connecticut. He didn't need to. He had proven his worth to them and if he wanted to talk about fat girls giving good head or his selling Viagra backstage, it wasn't going to diminish his value. He wasn't a generic mid-carder. He was a specialty act. You want Teddy Long...you call *Teddy Long.* With these

underwear model athletes on TV every week, you don't have many one-in-a-millions.

When we worked with Sabu on *YouShoot* I hadn't met him yet, but I'd seen him on other shows. He was shy, a little tough to get talking, but I knew he was honest. He wasn't afraid to talk about bribing Sunny with pills. Sabu is one cat that doesn't give a fuck. Know why? There's only one Sabu. And he knows it. You want Sabu? You're calling *Sabu.*

There was a stretch of time that we fell into a trap because we took our eye off our product and we started looking around the marketplace. We saw other producers snatching talent as soon as they were released from WWE. We felt pressure to land these names. It was so stupid. We should have known better.

Those other producers *should* make every effort to grab those names because their shows are largely without format. The traditional shoot interview is a career retrospective. We don't produce that. We have shows that require special qualities. *Guest Booker* requires the guest to have been a booker. *Timeline* requires our guest to have worked near the top of a company for an entire year. *Breaking Kayfabe* requires the guest to be willing to open the most troubled sides of themselves for me and the audience. It requires trust. *Back to the Territories* requires the guest to have been heavily entrenched in one of the classic territories of old. *YouShoot* requires a guest to be honest, good humored, and to call a *dick* a *dick* when asked to. Someone who call roll with it will have a blast on *YouShoot.*

There's no generic shoot interview show we do where any worker would be fine to come on and chronicle their career. We produced some *YouShoots* with folks that were nice guys but didn't fit the requirements of that show. They may have been cases of *right guest, for the wrong show,* but I don't think we had any shows that would have worked for them.

To be fair, Anthony was always much more realistic with the value of the contemporary stars than I was. I was caught up in getting there fast. "Kayfabe Commentaries Lands First Shoot Interview With Recently Released, 25 Year-Old, 14-Time Intercontinental Champion." I would take a call from a booking agent or promoter with a name that was just released from WWE. Their time on TV may have been marginal, but damnit they were just on WWE TV! Anthony had a better sense on the new guys' value for us.

I think the world could have done without *YouShoot: Monster BC*, *YouShoot: Matt Sydal*, and *YouShoot: Shane Helms.* Nice guys all of them, I'd buy each a beer. But I think that's the problem. Perhaps a degree of repugnance is a prerequisite for *YouShoot.*

Not long after producing that stretch of shows, we regrouped. By releasing *YouShoots* with Teddy Long, Scott Hall, RVD, and 2 Cold Scorpio we had dropped a handful of shows that redeemed us and served as a promise to fans that the *YouShoot* brand would be more carefully tended to and protected.

9. We’ll do it Live!

James Soubasis of Legends of the Ring called me and said they wanted to get Dixie Carter who, at that time, was chairwoman and president of TNA Wrestling, to make a convention appearance. TNA was often maligned as the bastard stepchild of the wrestling landscape. The federation was a distant second runner to the monolithic WWE and, in truth, there was really no third. There were popular, larger-scale independent federations with some global reach and a passionate Internet following, but with no national TV exposure their revenues were dwarfed by WWE and TNA. There were two, and really, only one.

But that runner-up was consistently in the wrestling news. They hired controversial writer Vince Russo. They poached some big names, albeit not the youngest wrestlers, from the wrestling world. They knew how to make decisions that kept them in digital ink. Among the vocal Internet wrestling community, they were an oft-used punchline. To the hardcore wrestling fan it was sport to expound TNA was a joke. Dixie was at the helm and who better to aim their fashionable vitriol at than a rather fashionable daughter of Texas energy magnate, Bob Carter. In something out of a cable sitcom, Dixie was bosslady of the big, sweaty boys. It invited parody.

Who better a guest on *YouShoot* than Dixie? The thousands of Internet message board dwellers and wrestling writers alike would come out in

droves to pose a question to their favorite target, wherein she was forced to watch or read, and answer them. That last part was the slam dunk. After all these months and years yelling in the wind, the wrestling journalists who so often wondered what was on Dixie's mind when she did this or that with the TNA product, would get an answer from her. Fans could ask her *anything.* They could tell her the product sucks. They could ask her to explain questionable talent decisions. This was tailor made for someone like Dixie.

I told James we could partner Kayfabe Commentaries and Legends of the Ring yet again and make this a live event, dubbed *YouShoot: LIVE!* Now, not only could we play videos and read emails to the guest in the "answer it all" seat, but fans could attend and take a live mic and address Dixie in person.

But this would never happen, I thought. Why would Dixie open herself up to this? And if she wanted to compromise the "answer it all" aspect of *YouShoot* by not answering certain things then we couldn't do it. The show would lose credibility. It had to be a true open forum, with all the questions that would fit into the time frame being asked–good, bad, and ugly. This would be quite a coup if we could pull it off. We had to take a shot.

I told James about the idea and he and Terence were on-board. We came up with a number to offer her, which really was moot. The Carter family business, Panda Energy, was worth billions. We were not expecting to entice Dixie with a money offer. It was more symbolic, a token of respect and a sign of our commitment. More likely than not, this would be further reason on her part to ignore this offer.

There was, however, something that might work in our favor. With TNA constantly in the maelstrom of Internet criticism, they really could have used some good press. Maybe some of their stars could come out here also, appear at the convention with Dixie, meet the fans. The whole deal could be a big, fat photo-op. TNA did have fans. They could come out and lather their stars with admiration. It could be a feel-good gala for TNA, *YouShoot* video aside. Would that really be enough to swing the pendulum to her accepting this, though?

James made the call to his contact in TNA at the time, Brian Wittenstein. They talked about the offer and he said they would get back to James. Sometimes in life, you just don't know what winds are blowing on the other side of the world. Maybe that "good press" angle was effective. Maybe the gruff, Brooklyn dialect in which James elicited his own brand of poetry

(“fuck that guy” “go do something, Terence” “he’s an asshole”) was enough. Maybe Dixie had an old sorority friend who lived in Hoboken that she wanted to visit. Whatever the source of the gust, Dixie blew right into our waiting arms.

This was, of course, round 1. The “okay” over the phone was one thing. I’m big on contracts when you don’t have a relationship with someone, and so is James. We had ours and they had theirs. We combined some language and sent it down to Nashville. There were some things that were obviously negotiable like schedules, times, talent fees, and the like. But there were some things that were very definitely non-negotiable on our end. We needed ownership of anything shot or photographed that weekend, in regards to the appearance. The biggie was that Kayfabe Commentaries had total control of the content of the program. Period. It was one sentence with no legalese to be spun as unclear. Their lawyers would try to pick this apart and this would sink the deal, I assumed.

Within a couple of days it was done though. We had a fully executed contract that guaranteed Dixie Carter would be appearing on the first *YouShoot: LIVE!* with total control of the program retained by us. We would be able to do a true *YouShoot* with her. We were thrilled and couldn’t wait to tell our fans and the wrestling media. This would surely be a dream come true for them, based on the public’s apparent obsession with Dixie and TNA. Now she would stand on stage in New Jersey and say “bring it.” Jesus, I feared what could be brought. She had some set of balls.

But the reaction was not what I expected. Immediately we met criticism from the wrestling world. Many of the journalists were neutral, at best. There wasn’t a cacophony of “I’m firing up the webcam and getting my answers.” It was more like, “sounds interesting. In other news John Cena won…” Weird.

Then the fans and Internet trolls immediately began with “oh they won’t ask her the hard questions,” or “TNA will have control over what they can ask.” We wouldn’t have bothered with the show if we couldn’t do this the *YouShoot* way. But you can’t answer that criticism unless it’s asked directly. Most of the people you hear from repeatedly are wired negatively and that’s how their neurons fire. They smear their shit all over as much of the world as they can. It’s attention and validation for some that are social cripples, uninspired, undateable, and unsuccessful. They are the minority but they’re loud. They have the time to be. We are all working.

Everything was set. Dixie, Wittenstein, and Ronnie Lang, Dixie's security guard, would board a plane in Nashville mid-afternoon. They'd be picked up by a Town Car and delivered to the venue in time for Dixie to change, powder her nose and hit the stage. We worked through the questions, videos, and emails. We were ready.

Anthony and I met with James and Terence at the venue a week or so prior to go over all the logistics, lighting and power requirements, draping, and all of the production stuff. Then we sat down to pare all the question down to a tight show. With *YouShoot*, the biggest challenge Anthony has in assembling the show is question selection and placement. The most obvious or hot button questions for a particular guest are asked fifteen times by fifteen different people. The question is phrased differently by each individual, obviously. So the trick becomes choosing which one to put in the script. Maybe one is asked on a video submission, which we like to use as much as possible. Maybe one is worded better. But maybe one that reads like shit is funny because the guy is from another country, and Anthony feels I could make a joke there. Maybe one of the questions references something that we can turn into a game. Which one do you pick? I don't know how he does it but I don't ask. It works.

James was getting annoyed by the amount of negativity in the questions. Many were critical of her and some were outright insulting. There were some positive questions too. Anthony and I were on the same page that whichever questions were chosen, they had to be representative of what the fans felt. So if half of the questions were very critical of her decisions, despite how many questions we had to cut to make a tight show, we still had to have half of the questions represent that attitude. If we had 25% of total submissions that were positive and voiced support for TNA, then that percentage had to be upheld in the show. We would not stack the deck either way, but we got hundreds and hundreds of questions. Most wouldn't make it in just due to numbers. So we wanted to keep the integrity of the fan response. And we did.

James thought many of the fan questions showed no class. He was, of course, correct. One video question was asked by someone on the toilet. James thought this put forth a negative image of the production and the entire event in general. We had some animated debate about this but Anthony and I were solid in our position–the show would be representative of the fans, good, bad, ugly, and constipated.

Only *one question* was cut for content. I was given final say and I censored a question about the grooming of Dixie's bush. Not because it wasn't interesting! It was a great question and I think that could have sparked some good conversation. But I did think it could have put us past a point-of-no-return in Dixie respecting the process. I don't know. Maybe I should have left it in. It's not like I had to kick off the show with it.

A question came up in the days before the show...do we send the questions to her in advance? Many fans don't realize, I learned, that guests always know the questions in an interview show. I don't care which show you're talking about, from Carson and Letterman's days up to Kimmel and Fallon's shows. The guests do a "pre-interview" on the phone with a writer's assistant, and they sift through some topics. The assistant brings those stories and topics back to the writers and the host and they decide what would be best for the 11-minute segment. Backstage on the day of the show, the guest meets with the assistant and they go over the final list of stories and topics that the host will ask about. They finalize anything else that the guest may have thought of and then they're on.

You can't put someone on a show and have them "ummm" and "uhhhh" through a show. The guest needs to prepare. It doesn't mean they have to *lie*. They're still telling the story about their pet turtle when they were five, so what's the difference if they prepared to tell the story or they thought of it on the spot while in the guest's chair?

Having said that, Anthony does keep the *YouShoot* scripts away from me until they're on my computer screen during the shoot. He thinks my reactions to the fan questions are more genuine and in-line with the guest's if we both don't know what's coming. He's right, but I really would like to practice the fucking names of some of those Japanese wrestlers that show up in questions I have to read. But he'll prep me before the show with general directions like, "I front-loaded the show with the fun stuff and the games, then we have some WWE and WCW questions. If you're low on time, cut from the potpourri section on down." Nothing specific is revealed to me, so when John the Revelator shows up on the screen standing on a soup line playing the trombone out of his ass, you have my real reaction.

Timeline scripts are sent to me for a final edit though, and I often share them with the talent so they can jog their memory or make a phone call and have the details about the noteworthy dates in the show. The same is true

with our most recent series *Supercard*. It's detail heavy so I need to add my notes to Anthony's and get the talent thinking before they get in the chair.

For this *YouShoot* though, TNA called, I think it was Wittenstein, and requested the questions for Dixie. We said we'd let them know. Anthony and I talked about it and decided there was no harm in this. We weren't changing anything for them, so who cared if they knew the questions. You really think Dixie didn't know she was going to be asked, "Why did you hire Vince Russo?" We sent the shooting script.

On the day of the show TNA wanted to set up a conference call before the gang boarded the flight. Alarm bells went off all over the place but we had a contract. They couldn't pull any shit. Tickets were sold for the event. There was no iPPV but the DVD was announced and we had a spot on the release schedule for it. All this conference call would be for me was a wish for a safe flight.

At 11:30 am I strode toward the conference room at the Crowne Plaza with Anthony beside me. I had him grab a handheld camera with a full charge before we left the ballroom.

"Why?" he asked.

"To play in court."

I got in the conference room with Anthony, James, and Terence. On the line was Brian Wittenstein, TNA's official…I have no idea what he was.

"Where's Dixie?" I asked the speakerphone.

"She has some last minute stuff to do before we get on the plane." The grooming question I edited came to mind. I kept that to myself. Anthony was taping this, after all, for the trial where we would bankrupt Panda Energy for breach of contract.

"We just wanted to go over some of these questions," Brian continues.

"Who's 'we?' Where is 'we?' I'm talking to you."

Brian went on to explain that there were some questions that should be cut from the show.

Really?

"Brian, these are the questions from the fans. That's the show you signed up for. Dixie will look so much better if she just answered it all, even the tough stuff. If this is a puff-piece it will be so much worse for her."

"She didn't even see these yet," Wittenstein insisted. "We just want to edit this before she sees it."

“Well you can’t,” I said. “That’s the show. You can edit anything you want but that’s the show she’s getting when she sits down. She didn’t even ask you do this? Take out your contract.”

“We would like some questions taken out,” he said.

“Okay, then I’ll read the contract to you.” I read the clause where we had control of the content of the show. This script was show content. I think I may have used a four-letter word or two and told him to get on the plane or they were going to be late. And if they didn’t, they were knowingly in breach and I had this all on tape.

Did Dixie really not see the script and not put Brian up to this? I don’t know. Though now, in retrospect, I think this was Brian and maybe Bob Ryder running interference so they could go back and look good. “Look what I did for you, Dixie! We strong-armed those guys into taking out some questions.” They were trying to protect the boss and the product, and stick their noses further up her ass. Truth is, though, they would have hurt her more if they didn’t let her have the forum to go out and defend her company. *That’s* what she wanted. Guess we were the only ones to see that.

I said I was done and they should get on a plane. I left the room. They did get on a plane but there were delays and they ended up running later than scheduled, which was fine with me. If they had designs on more discussion about the script I would actually prefer to be sitting on-stage next to an empty chair, with an audience in front of me as she walked in. No choice but to get rolling at that point.

We were past the start time and the audience was in place. We didn’t necessarily have a pre-show planned, but I did remember we had our friend Bill Apter. Bill, the longtime, venerable wrestling journalist and one-episode host of *Ringside*, was on hand to cover the event for 1wrestling.com and ask Dixie some questions. But if you know Bill Apter as well as I know Bill Apter, you know he is always ready for some karaoke! I went to Bill and explained I had about a half hour to kill before Dixie’s car arrived. Would he turn on the showman inside him and light up the room for me? Our sound guy would bring up any karaoke track they could download.

“If you can get me on early to ask Dixie my questions,” he requested. “It’s my wedding anniversary tonight and there’s a lot of home-heat because I’m here.” So if you were wondering why we went to questions from the

press so early in the show, there's your answer. I thanked Bill for doing it, and for the term "home-heat."

Bill is a guy of another time, and not because he's old. Apter has the soul of an entertainer of yesteryear. He can do straight man, and he can take a pie in the face, as we showed at *Ring Roasts*. Bill is serious about his wrestling but he's also so well versed in music and the arts. I mentioned that the guys in this business that I spend free time with are the guys that can talk about things other than wrestling. Bill and I talk musical theatre. He's like an encyclopedia and I'm not, though I did some back in school and have certainly seen my share. Like I mentioned before, my wife is involved in that world so I'm around it all the time, but he's the real deal. She should have married him.

Bill Apter entertained the room for a half hour. He was up on chairs, he was going all over the room. I love Bill. He's always been there for us to host shows, be roastmaster, take a pie in the face, or sing "New York, New York" to superfan The Hess Express.

I was notified that Dixie and crew were here. I headed to the back to meet her quickly and get the show going. We had an army pull Bill Apter off the stage and we started the show. I thought it would be fitting to set the tone and have the marble-mouthed, Boston accented Hess Express come out onstage and read the disclaimers about no videotaping, and consent to be taped, etc. No one understood a fucking word he said and we were ready to roll.

The interview went well. Dixie answered *everything*, sat through every insult, and did her best as president and company chair to defend her decisions and TNA's place in the landscape. We played the video on the toilet. We played the video of a guy being woken up to ask his question, remarking that he's sorry he dozed off, but the latest TNA pay-per-view was on and put him to sleep. We read quotes from Vince McMahon about her product being "tawdry." We read quotes from the Wrestling Observer and got her reaction. We threw everything but the kitchen sink at her. She came off charming, intelligent, tough, and humble. I think people were ready to see her fall apart. She did what a CEO is supposed to do–defend her company and employees. She would have been a piece of shit if she turned on the people that worked for her. But she defended them, from Russo to Hogan.

Dixie wound up in the hotel retaurant that night after the show, sitting at the bar with her white wine, Ronnie the bodyguard nearby, and chatting with *anyone* that came up to have a word. She was mostly welcoming wrestlers from TNA kissing her ass, or unemployed wrestlers in town for the convention...*also* kissing her ass. But she hugged fans and talked to them about whatever they asked when they went up to her.

At some point James and I were summoned over. I gave her a hug and thanked her again. She asked us to slide in for a drink but I told her she had more resumes to take and I didn't want to get in the way. We probably had like 4 more shows to shoot that weekend anyway. She was gracious with her time, I'll say that. Shrewdly, she was certainly making the most of this outing and meeting her fans. The following day Dixie was our convention guest and her line for photos and autographs never ended. For all the hate in *YouShoot* videos and Internet posts, all I saw that Saturday morning was a line that stretched through everyone else's table.

During the taping of the show, Wittenstein and Ronnie were standing off stage right. While Dixie and I were mixing it up onstage, complete with my rather spot-on Vince McMahon impersonation, some of my crew noticed them reacting to me, at times nodding at each other.

After the show at some point in the night I ended up in an elevator with Ronnie.

"What'd you think?" I asked him.

"Funny. Good stuff," he said. After a short pause he spoke again. "Listen, don't say anything, but stay in touch with Wittenstein. There's some changes coming." Then he went back to staring straight ahead, secret service style. There was only an old couple in the elevator with us, he didn't have to go all stoic. Maybe it was practice.

"And you think I could fit into these changes?" I asked. He just nodded, still staring straight ahead. His floor came and as he got off he reiterated.

"Stay in touch with him. There may be an opening."

That was flattering but I often heard that type of stuff in regards to the "big two" even from fans just speculating. Truthfully, what would I do there? What would they do with me? I'm not standing there holding a microphone to someone else's mouth asking them if they're gonna win the title tonight. That's not what I do. That's not why they would be interested in me. Any company that wanted me would have to be bold in their programming choices. I would deliver honesty, not as part of any storyline.

If a company wanted the shoot guy, they'd have to build a format where I could operate in that world. What I deliver is credibility for the shoot fan. The minute I'm shilling the next pay-per-view and talking about the evil deeds done to the valiant hero, that credibility, my superpower, is gone.

I didn't feel like waiting for some offer to do some on-camera drivel for them, so I reached out to Wittenstein and instead I pitched KC's services to run a TNA series. They were intrigued and we set a date to have a formal conference call.

I sent the Powerpoint deck to them and Brian, Bob Ryder and I set a time. We got on the phone and I pitched the series *TNA Unchained*. I felt their company desperately needed a kind of credibility that WWE does not have. A major company that owned not just the TV fans, but also the passionate and maniacal Internet community would have it made. TNA was repeatedly emulating WWE, and you will never unseat them in this market if you're just doing what they do. A company really has to differentiate itself and *not* just in the shape of the ring. TNA was taking the former WWE talent. The show looked like WWE, with the ramp and the big screen. The backstage vignettes were similar. Maybe you had to keep some of the conventions of modern day TV wrestling so fans aren't put off. But what about what they do *off* of TV?

This would be the first ever "unsanctioned" shoot series for a specific company. Their top talent would appear on a shoot interview and just like all of our other shows, we would talk about everything–TNA, WWE, their arrests, overdoses...whatever. It would be a *legit shoot.* We would produce the series on our own, so it remained a Kayfabe Commentaries production. Basically, it was independent. But with our ability to put that TNA logo on it, so many more eyes would see it. Our fans and Internet fans of shoots would see that Kurt Angle was on there and this wasn't a work. He was talking Karen, medication, the whole nine yards.

Now, from there TNA was free to develop an angle. You didn't have to do the "you-stole-my-title" or "you-stole-my-TV-girlfriend" shit that Internet fans are tired of. Now they could have some angles developed off of shoot stuff. "You-stole-my-wife-in-real-life" is an angle that, I suspect, would get a lot of the hard-to-please Internet eyeballs on your show. The promo options are endless.

In our presentation to TNA I stressed credibility with the *people*. I didn't think the emphasis should necessarily have been on bigger arenas, big tours,

big (retired) names, giant entrances, or Titantrons. The presentation was called “Taking it to the Streets.” That was the mentality I kept selling while I presented. There were images of mobs in the street. They needed the people and everything else would happen *for them.* You didn’t have to increase ad budget. If you were the darlings of the Internet wrestling community because you had programing that was honest and badass, you’d be talked about on every message board, on YouTube posts with clips from your shows, and they’d be doing the advertising for you.

You can’t bullshit the people, though. It can’t be an angle. You need some of it to be a shoot, and that’s what we can help with. Just let us shoot the series. What you do with it from there is up to you, I said. But we will bring the Internet wrestling community to your door. Then you can make it work. You need the *opposite* of what WWE needs. You don’t need the kids with the foam fingers. Cena has them, it’s over. Let them play their yacht rock. Let’s be punk.

They liked it, they were impressed, and they never followed up.

Well, they *are* known for their great decisions.

. . .

When Vince Russo was released from TNA it caused a very public debate (again) about the merits of Russo’s influence in modern wrestling. Vince was the lightning rod behind wrestling’s most edgy and boundary-pushing storylines during the Attitude era. You can count on two hands how many wrestlers have caused this much division and debate for this long, much less a wrestling TV writer. Vince’s reputation as a purveyor of bad taste, titillating programming, and big ratings were his calling card. He was a near obsession with wrestling journalists who largely attributed the deaths of wrestling promotions to him. When he was gone from TNA, it seemed this would be a great contender for another *YouShoot: LIVE!* Dixie and her company were the talk of the business when we asked her to be on. Now Russo was filling the websites and newsletters.

Legends of the Ring was on board for another co-promotion and this time we would tap the magic of Internet pay-per-view. We reached out to Vince. James talked to him about the logistical end of things and the convention appearance in general. Vince said he wanted to talk to me on the phone first about the *YouShoot: LIVE!* He really only had general questions and I

suspect he just wanted to get a sense of me and my character. There were sharks and goofballs throughout this industry and they were no doubt all leaving voicemails for him since his release. I'm sure he wanted to be judicious about with whom he should work, right out of the gate from TNA.

I told him that James and I were the same type of guys. If you had our word with anything, it was golden. We only talked for ten minutes or so and Vince said he had a good vibe and he could trust us. I told him that he was correct and he would have only a positive experience with us.

If people had disdain for the TNA product and, perhaps, thought Dixie to be a little out of touch, then they had outright hatred for Vince Russo. I wouldn't have to do much to incite fans to send questions and videos for this one. Of course, that doesn't mean I didn't try a little. In all the advertisements we billed him as the "former WCW World Heavyweight Champion" rather than a writer. One of the things he was most maligned for was writing his winning of the very same title that Ric Flair, Harley Race, Jack Brisco and Dusty Rhodes had held, if you trace the WCW title back to its NWA roots. The problem was that Vince Russo wasn't a wrestler like the previous names who crisscrossed the country giving blood and sweat to defend those titles and attach the aura of believability to them. It was heresy to some wrestlers and fans.

With the product under head writer Vince Russo's control, Vince Russo wrestled. Under Vince Russo's control, Vince Russo won the title. Under Vince Russo's control, Vince Russo was on TV every week, on-camera. Some talent and fans thought that this undermined the contributions of the wrestlers on the card. Who was right? Who was wrong?

Who gives a shit? I have a pay-per-view to sell! *Big letters, boys...FORMER WCW WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION! Kids, send those emails in! The Champ is waiting to answer you!*

I expected record turnout. I especially expected the wrestling media to get on-board and participate in this in a big way. Some wrestling Internet and newsletter journalists literally made a living off Vince Russo. Their columns were *filled* with quarter-hour TV ratings analysis when he was writing the product. Some have written books postulating he was a contributor to the demise of a financially troubled WCW. Here was their chance. After years and years of writing about him, speculating about decisions of his, and generally being critical of him, they could now ask

anything and get their answer either face-to-face or on email. This was a dream opportunity we were giving the wrestling journalists.

We would have Vince out as soon as possible to shoot some advance promos for the show that we could drop all over the Internet. I went to work on a handful of scripts for that. They were funny vignettes with a touch of the old ESPN promos, where a sports star has some awkward interaction with an ESPN journalist. Vince and I would sit in the *YouShoot* set and do four or five of them. Then we would do a turnaround in the suite and do a 10-minute promotional interview, no prepared discussion. I had questions for him that we thought the fans would have in their mind as they considered whether or not to buy this iPPV.

Vince called me and said he was contacted by Rob Feinstein of RF Video. Rob wanted to do a shoot with Vince. Our show was already advertised and it was live, so I couldn't move the release date around. Vince didn't want to do it if I felt it would interfere with our show. I told Vince I would work it out with Rob and we would get back to him.

Within the business it helps all producers to be on good terms with one another. We are all fighting for the same crumbs that fall off the wrestling table where big plates of WWE are served. Sometimes we have to work together for everyone to get what they want. It turned out we could actually use this to our advantage. I told Rob he could shoot his show if he keeps it off market for 6 months after *YouShoot: LIVE!* Also, RF and KC could split expenses for his initial trip out east and we could knock out all the promos for the iPPV. Rob would get his show which wouldn't step on our event, we would get our promos, and we'd both pay 50% of what the flight and rooming would have set us back.

These promos were carefully crafted by me and needed to be pulled off in a very precise manner. They would serve an important purpose in the run up to the event. You see, the "former WCW champion" thing was not doing anything to help the public's distaste for Russo and those sentiments were having a deleterious effect on our show. The wrestling press, who I'd expected to flock to the show, were cool to the idea. The public was pissed at the ads and chose to post all over the place that they weren't going to give Vince Russo one bit of attention.

We needed these promos to show Vince Russo in a likeable light. Not in an overt way, though. It was a delicate thing to design this. He just had to be humorous and laugh at himself and his legacy. I would be the foil in the

promos, a bit bumbling. They were very funny and came out great. They were all shot to look like behind the scenes moments caught on-camera. In one promo, I am suggesting some “great ideas” I had for the show, like laptop on a pole, Jamie Dundee on a pole, Hess Express on a pole, Pole on a pole (“we’ll get Ivan Putski,” I said), and he nixes them all. I walk away and he sits alone, thinking. Finally he calls out to me, “I got it...Hess Express in a *box!”* That box comment references a story he tells where Jim Cornette told a room of bookers “anything that comes out of a box is over.”

In another promo Russo makes ridiculous suggestions about the laptop shooting pyro and a storyline we would shoot for the event where we take the laptop to the desert and bury it, referencing an oft-ridiculed Russo angle where Ric Flair was buried in the desert. I tell him that I wanted a more straight-forward interview where fans ask questions and he answers them. He says, “straight forward doesn’t work for me, brother” and walks off the set leaving me sitting alone.

They didn’t only work, they worked *too* well. Vince came across so well we started reading *positive* comments on YouTube under the promos. People were saying they never knew he was funny. Viewers liked that the promos were poking fun and he could roll with it and poke fun at himself. It was good that this softened his image but the sheer amount of positive comments was getting to us. We were reading 50% positive. That might be trouble if it continued.

Our email submissions were now becoming *supportive* of Russo. These ads were being talked about all over the place and it was now beginning to starting to slant the show too much. We needed him to stay a controversial figure because that gets people off their asses to submit questions or order the iPPV. 50% likability is middle of the road, and you know what people do with middle of the road? Ignore it. I wanted to soften him a *little* to take some of the hate out of it. Controversial is okay, it works. Hatred doesn’t. Now he’s gonna be invited to talk to boy scout troops. I really feared this would create a dispassionate reaction to the show and we’d get low buys.

Then there was Jim Cornette. Without a ton of backstory, suffice it to say there was a lot of heat between Russo and Cornette. It was pretty bad back then but not as fiery as today. It has recently become dangerous, with Cornette making some very specific threats to Russo. Back then it was mostly Cornette ranting and raving about how awful it was to work with him and Russo mostly laughing him off and taking the occasional jab.

Cornette was on fire though. He did say, “If I could find a way to kill him and get away with it, I would! But if I could also find a way to fuck Pamela Anderson I would, and I’m not having any luck there either.” From Jim’s perspective, Russo cost him a job working in creative in WWE, then he went to TNA when Cornette was there and cost him a job there. From Russo’s perspective, Cornette and Russo worked in two places and both bosses, McMahon and Dixie, both chose Russo over Cornette. I couldn’t tell you which perspective is more accurate. I wasn’t there. If I were they probably would have fired me and kept them both.

Jim Cornette and Kayfabe Commentaries had a great relationship. His programing did very well for us, and Jim was at his best beside me. Our type of programming was tailor made for him. So naturally, when we booked *YouShoot: LIVE with Vince Russo* I reached out to Jim. I asked if he wanted to send a video. He declined, saying he’d never be a part of anything Russo was a part of. That’s fine. I expected that answer and I understood. But I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t ask.

In the 10-minute promotional interview with Russo and me, I asked only 5 or 6 basic questions. I didn’t write Russo’s answers. I didn’t send Russo these questions for him to prepare anything. One of the questions I asked Vince was if he expected to hear from any wrestlers he didn’t get along with at *YouShoot: LIVE!* He answered that he wouldn’t be surprised if he heard from a certain manager “with a tennis racquet.” We laughed. It wasn’t written for him, it was an honest answer. Russo probably *did* expect to hear a rant from Cornette. Incidentally, Corny sent a video into *YouShoot: LIVE!* for Dixie which we played on the show. He asked why she ever hired Vince Russo.

I was away for the weekend shortly after our promos and the short promo interview with Russo and me were released, and I awoke to this charming statement that Jim Cornette had released to the wrestling media:

It has come to my attention that I was referred to in a "trailer" for Vince Russo's latest attempt to rape the wrestling business, a You Shoot *video and IPPV with Kayfabe Commentaries to take place in June. I was alluded to in such a way as to make prospective viewers/buyers believe I would be submitting questions or even appearing via video or in person.*

Let me state this clearly. I have worked with KFC in the past, and have been treated well and enjoyed my experiences with them. However, this

trailer was shot without my knowledge. I was contacted by KFC to participate in this project, and my response was, in no uncertain terms, that there has not been enough money printed yet for me to add an ounce of credibility or an iota of entertainment value to this blithering cretin's continued attempts to shit on our profession. I further think that any promoter who books him, wrestling fans who spend money on anything he has something to do with or anyone else who enables him to continue to haunt our sport should be ashamed of themselves if they truly love wrestling.

So let me clarify this--if you are buying a ticket to see this, or the DVD or IPPV of this horseshit expecting to see, hear or hear FROM me in any way, shape, or form, you will be disappointed and your money is being taken under false pretenses. I will have no involvement in this whatsoever. I am offended that my participation is being alluded to with the goal of putting even one more penny in this flaming asshole's pocket, and I beg everyone who loves the sport of wrestling to boycott this and any future "appearance" of Vince Russo in connection with pro wrestling, so as not to encourage him to continue to offend all of us who would just like to see him crawl back under his rock so that the industry can try and heal itself from the wounds of his unfortunate involvement in it.

- Jim Cornette

The statement was so misinformed in so many ways. Cornette's Trump-like rush to the Internet proving ground before doing any fact checking, or simply dialing my phone number, was irresponsible. Had he called me I would have put things into better perspective for Jim, though I'm not sure that is what he wanted. I saw this from day one as the jilted lover lashing out. He wanted to tell everyone his beloved Kayfabe Commentaries was fucking the ugly girl across town and they should fuck us over in return, and not support the project. I made us the man in that analogy.

I was not angry that he spoke out. He was defending his honor. I *was* pissed that he told fans to take food off my table and the table of Legends of the Ring, and all of our collective workers because he doesn't like Russo. I reached out to Jim who was out of state. I told his wife Stacey to have him give me a ring when he checks in at home for messages. Oh, you didn't know it was 1974?

I gave it a day and Jim never touched base. Well, we couldn't really let that statement sit unaddressed, as we were less than two months away from the iPPV. So on April 12, 2012 I released a statement on behalf of the company, and the event:

It's been unfortunately and errantly reported by Jim Cornette that Kayfabe Commentaries has in some way been misrepresenting any involvement by him in the June 1st "YouShoot LIVE: Vince Russo" event. This is untrue, and while any fan, worker, announcer, or manager is welcome to submit questions to any "YouShoot" program, we did not advertise his doing so for this event. It seems Mr. Cornette objects to Vince Russo having mentioned that he wouldn't be surprised if he heard from him during the show.

We did not book this event with the expectation or requirement that Jim participate, despite his hundreds of hours of publically available discussion of Russo. This, of course, includes promos shot for Ring Roasts III in 2010 wherein he challenges Russo to a bare knuckle brawl in the ballroom of the Crowne Plaza at his Roast. That promo was the brainchild of Mr Cornette and mentioned Russo, whom we had no intention of booking for the event. There was apparently no ethical violation in that case.

In short, we have not, and will not, promise the involvement of anyone for whom we have not yet received a video submission. There will be plenty to discuss at "YouShoot LIVE: Vince Russo" and lots of entertainment value to be had by fans all over the world, as is consistent with all of the productions generated by Kayfabe Commentaries. All of this seems common sense to me and, hopefully, rational folk as well.

Despite his misrepresentations and pleas for a boycott, we are quite fond of Jim Cornette, accept him as he is, and appreciate his contributions to both KC, and the wrestling industry at large – a wrestling industry that no doubt stands shocked and amazed that Jim Cornette has overreacted and become unreasonably emotional at a perceived slight.

Onward,
Sean Oliver

I was quite proud of that. Cornette's knickers dug in real deep, no doubt. I know he took particular offense to us "accepting him as he is." There was

no retort to that from Camp Corny. Cornette later said that we made him the "retarded uncle at the barbeque" in that statement. Hey, I had a company to defend.

After having come to terms with the fact that I was no longer getting a Christmas card from Louisville, I would prepare to lose some more friends and associates. I reached out to *The Wrestling Observer/Figure 4 Weekly's* radio host Bryan Alvarez to see if I could come on and promote the upcoming *YouShoot: LIVE!* We had been longtime advertisers on their site, and between the company and Anthony personally had subscriptions to both newsletters for like 15 years. We'd also sent them dozens of DVDs to preview. I was sure they'd accommodate.

Besides, Bryan wrote the book *The Death of WCW* back in 2004 that dealt rather heavily with Russo's creative decisions. Not only was I sure he'd have me on to discuss it, I figured he and maybe Dave Meltzer would have some questions for us to ask at the event. As I'd mentioned, an entire industry was built on the rush to report ratings numbers on Tuesday morning and Russo was a big part of that for a long time, whether on-camera or off. Bryan offered to record something at 11:00 a.m. on a particular date and I could not do that time slot. I asked him if we could choose another day or time. He said I could just come on after the iPPV and discuss it.

To sell tickets to the event that happened already? I never did it.

I was trying to get media to attend or send questions. I wasn't able to get the participation I thought we should have. Actually, I got shit. I couldn't understand why.

We wanted the day of the event to be special, with some behind the scenes videos being released throughout the day. One of them was my taking a call from New Jack. He was calling because he wanted to be part of the event. He was intent on asking Vince Russo to admit that ECW had an influence on Attitude-era WWE, as evidenced by the Sandman and Stone Cold characters' similarities. He wanted to drive up and ask him in person. As you see in the behind the scenes footage on the DVD release, the only two conditions I had were his understanding that there is no money in the appearance and that there are no New Jack shenanigans, like his performance at our *Ring Roast* of Terry Funk. He agreed and started the 2-hour drive up from Atlantic City.

Security was a headache. There were going to be 50 wrestlers in that hotel the night before the convention and there were so many guys being vocal about their dislike for Russo that we didn't want to take any chances. We put him up at another hotel under the name "Fred Sanford" and had him driven back and forth with two security guards who we put with Vince at all times. Even for the walkthrough before the show, you'll see them standing beside the stage if you watch the extra footage on the DVD. We had to get Vince in through the back door necessitating a long walk through the maze of the resort.

One of the security concerns I had was about Smith Hart, of all people. He emailed me and asked if he could confront Vince and "ask that son of a bitch why he killed my brother Owen." He made it very clear that he wanted that answer face to face. Smith was a little bit "out there" so you never know what's on someone's mind, particularly if that mind really thought a horrific equipment failure equated to the writer of the show orchestrating the death.

As a funny epilogue to this and a perfect illustration of the wrestling business, several years later we had Vince back out to do some video with us and sign autographs at our convention table. All of a sudden, Smith Hart starts heading toward the table. Everyone shit because we all forgot about that email and the fact that Smith was appearing at this event also. But here he was. He walked right up to the table and extended his hand, which Vince shook.

"Hi Vince, good to see you." Almost without breaking stride, Smith walked off.

I don't think this show went off as it should have. We trimmed the nearly three-hour show down to the best stuff for the video release. We included all the behind the scenes stuff that we shot that day, as well as a new interview with Vince where we look back at the live show and what he would have answered differently. In the audience that night we had a large Russo contingent near the front row that were so loud we had to have security come over and quiet them down. It was just an awkward night, and I think it came across that way on screen. *YouShoot: LIVE!* just seemed to be a challenge we couldn't master.

10. E-C-DUB! … E-C-DUB!

Over the past ten years we've had occasion to work with many of the guys that made up the most colorful wrestling promotion ever, ECW. We spun off *Timeline: The History of WWE* to include *Timeline: The History of ECW* (and later *The History of WCW*). Chronicling the most out of control federation in history allowed us to hear tales of debauchery and general stupidity that our fans revel in. Having worked with so many of them and spending time with them has allowed me no other option but to give them their own chapter.

It had been some time since we'd worked with Sandman after his *YouShoot* and then his segment on *Wrestling's Most.* When he walked into the room for his edition of *Timeline: The History of ECW,* he was thinner than I'd remembered, and he had scars all over his neck and face, like he was driven here tied to a bumper.

Oh, and he brought a kid. Here is a perfect illustration of Super Agent Eric Simms at work. Everything was on time, the money was fair, but the one, small detail Eric neglected to tell me was that Hak's 5-year-old son was coming for the shoot.

The boy was adorable, and very funny actually. But he's also five. Sandman brought one frigging toy car for the boy and told him to go play in the corner. I was very confident Hak had it under control with that plan.

"Here, take this over there and be quiet." Sure. For two hours.

That particular show uses an unconventional overhead master shot with production elements intentionally in the shot. I needed to differentiate that show from the other two brands in the franchise, *The History of WCW* and *The History of WWE,* just as the actual ECW was so different from the federations profiled on those other series. Keeping the cables and crates in the master would also help create an ambiance for the ECW series. The problem with putting a 5-year-old in a corner for that particular series is that the corner is in the shot. Even if it were framed differently, kindergarteners are generally rarely still. So he's going to be in the shot. As we are talking about rats in the Travelodge blowing Sandman, we can cut to a nice wide shot of the boy so innocently and dreamily playing cars. Makes for a nice image.

None of this had crossed Sandman or Eric Simms' mind. It's troubling because it's *all* I can think about when it happens. Remember that crucial moment in our shoots...the entrance? When it doesn't go right it's very uncomfortable. Each of the troubling entrances we have outlined makes your balls retract into the sternum when they happen. You spend hours preparing and traveling and setting up, and then something fucked up goes down when the talent walks into your sacred set. Most times it happens when you've never worked with them before. Of course, in this case we'd worked with Sandman before. But never his son.

You already heard about "The Superstar Circus," courtesy of Billy Graham and his entourage. Then of course we had 'The Beefcake About-face," where the sight of fully lit video shoot is such an unwelcome sight during a hangover that simply leaving without explanation and fighting with your wife on the phone is a preferable activity. And ladies and gentlemen, here we have the third entrance called "Visitation Day." Oh, did I mention Sandman left the child's mother outside in the car for the entire shoot? At least he had a good reason not to have her come into a comfortable hotel room.

"Hak," I said, "do you want your wife to come up?"

"No, she's very ill, very ill," he said with all the charm of Charles Manson. To this day Hak still has no idea who I am.

E-C-W! … E-C-W!

New Jack is an interesting cat. We have always had a good working relationship and he's been a great guest on our shows. He has had, to be generous, a checkered past. On our intimate and personal show *Breaking*

Kayfabe he revealed a childhood that one can only expect to see on TV. As unbelievable as it rings upon hearing it, when you see the underlying anger in Jack it all makes sense. In the past few years or so Jack has mellowed. He ain't exactly sittin' on the porch with Ma and the pitcher of lemonade, but his days of terrorizing all in his radius are likely over.

Jack watched his father stab his mother repeatedly, as he recounted on *Breaking Kayfabe.* The brutal imagery of his mother's white nurse's outfit beginning to turn pink and red before the eyes of a school age Jerome "New Jack" Young was chilling. She was also shot in the leg by him as she ran from the house, carrying a toddler-age Jack. Fate, bad aim, or the intervention of a deity would have been the only thing to spare the child from taking any of the shotgun blast. Jack went on to rob stores as a teen and not very skillfully, as he told us. The accumulation of these events and behaviors certainly culminated in Jack's behavior in later years, working in and around ECW.

New Jack has worked with us on *YouShoot, Ring Roasts 2, Timeline: The History of ECW, YouShoot LIVE: Vince Russo, Breaking Kayfabe,* and *Missy Hyatt's Pajama Party* but my favorite New Jack moment came at a live event. We were in production for a series you'll hear about called *Raven's Restler Rescue* and we were shooting some locker room footage at a WrestlePro show in New Jersey. We'd also had a vending table set up selling our many wonderful and insightful DVDs over on the side with other vendors. There were wrestling figure dealers, some wrestlers signing and shilling books like I will soon be, and curiously, an empty table about ten feet to our right.

I was all over the venue that night with the crew shooting the reality show with Raven. We had a little break so I headed into the gymnasium and over toward our table to join the guys. On my way over I saw New Jack walking across the gym carrying a smart, leather briefcase, looking like he just murdered an accountant. I strode over to him.

"Here comes trouble," I jokingly said as I extended my hand. He shook it, but never stopped. He had that thousand-mile stare and he was moving more slowly than usual. Hell, it's a long train ride from Atlantic City. He must be tired. I'll give him some time to wake up. He'll probably grab some coffee.

I went to our vendor table to ensure that the old, 1980s LJN figures of Adrian Adonis and Corporal Kirchner being sold at the table to our left

were safely outselling our DVDs. Yup, check. And won't you look at that...New Jack is setting up at the table to our right. He's moving in slow motion, his actions oozing. He's sitting at the large empty table, and from his briefcase he slowly retrieves a stack of 8x10 publicity photos, a Sharpie, and methodically places both in front of him with the calculated precision of a surgeon. After a minute or so, the mission is complete. There sat Gangsta New Jack with great, upright posture, using exactly 8-inches by 10-inches of a 6-foot table, staring straight ahead, as still as a redwood. Wouldn't you rush over to that if you were a fan?

I hung at our table for a bit and talked to fans about our upcoming releases, took some photos with them, and waited for the matches to start. We had to shoot some footage of our subject of that episode of *Raven's Restler Rescue* in the ring. I looked over at New Jack's table and he was still sitting there doing his fiddle leaf fig tree impression. I grabbed a copy of his edition of *Breaking Kayfabe* and headed over to him.

"Hey Jack, I don't know if we ever got you one of these after we did it." I handed him the DVD, which he took and slowly placed in his briefcase at his feet. Then, back to position 1. Jesus, he must be *really, really* tired. He's out of it. He wouldn't be able to talk to a fan even if they did come over. I headed back to our table and then into the locker room with Anthony and Brian to start getting some footage as the matches were set to start.

We grabbed the stuff we needed before intermission, at which time we headed back to the vending area. Fans were buying DVDs, milling about at all the vendor tables. I love talking to our Kayfabe Commandos and if you ask *anyone* that has met me anywhere they will tell you I always spend some time to ask them their favorite shows and the reasons behind that answer. I talk to them and hear them out on suggestions. They thank me and take pictures with me but I'm just like them. I'm a just a fan who has them fooled.

During a break in the crowd I drop into a chair at our table and I hear a voice from my right.

"Yo Sean!" I turn to the table. There is New Jack, standing and smiling, alert and awake.

"Sean, you don't say 'hi' no more?"

E-C-W! … E-C-W!

That same night we had to spend some time in the men's room in the locker room area, filming Raven applying some make-up to our young

trainee for this episode. I was running camera and Anthony was on the boom mic in the tight space. Wrestlers wandered in and out to piss and shit while I kept the camera brace affixed and dodged traffic. At one point, wrestler John Morrison and ECW alumni Balls Mahoney join Raven and the young acolyte to whom Raven is applying the make-up. Some dick jokes ensue since we are in a locker room bathroom and a wrestling locker room is generally operating at a 12th grade level. Everyone is goofing around for the camera when Balls Mahoney announces he's had some bad salmon and he puked before and would actually like to try again. He heads to a stall and unloads his guts into the bowl. The camera captures the action as I fall victim to that reluctant reflex to keep filming *because* you should be stopping. It's the Zapruder thing. In a far less historically important event, it was the Balls vomiting thing.

Balls Mahoney probably deserves his own chapter. Balls was a 300 pound, heavily pierced and heavily tattooed biker-type who was intensely loved by ECW fans for his willingness to do anything in the ring. The brutality Balls would endure was legendary. He dished out his fair share as well. Balls would take awfully stiff steel chair shots to the head all the time and throw himself off anything he could with reckless abandon. Actually, so many of the ECW stars in the 90s had the same suicidal approach to the sport and it was part of what defined the ECW brand, wonderfully and tragically all the same.

Time had not been kind to Balls, as being run over by a tank on a nightly basis might precipitate. Balls was my age and was now toothless, scarred all over his head, and physically tested by just walking. Balls still worked on the independent circuit all the time. He was always backstage at the shows when we were shooting *Raven's Restler Rescue*, often with his young son, Chris.

Balls, real name Jon, was one of those amalgamations of personalities that wrestling treats us to. You don't meet Balls at the office, on the set, or anywhere else I've worked. I never worked in a traveling circus, though. Balls was indeed criminally brutal to the bodies of other in the ring and reckless with his own, but Balls Mahoney was one of the kindest souls you could ever meet, out of the ring. He was funny and very smart. Balls also loved to cook and, by all accounts, was quite adept. Balls read books all the time, but if you saw him coming down the street you'd move your garbage cans closer to the curb for collection.

On this, the Night of the Bad Salmon, Balls didn't have any table space to sell his photos and DVDs of his matches. All of the available vendor tables were taken so he came over to our rather full table of several hundred DVDs.

"Hey Sean, do you mind if I use a little spot on your table for my DVDs?" he asked. I was always happy to help someone with rancid salmon raging through their intestines and vomit in their beard. Besides, New Jack only had 5-feet available on his 6-foot table.

"Sure, Balls." As I went to remove the outermost row of our DVDs and make room at the table's end, Balls drags a chair over to the *front* of our table, where patrons generally stand, shop, and give us money, and drops down into the chair. He tosses a worn, 1990's style DVD folio on top of our displayed DVDs, as loose, home burned Maxell DVDs spill out on top of ours. He is sitting in front of our table, blocking access, alternately sprawling backward and then hunching over, moaning from the salmon. The only way I could have more effectively deterred shoppers was to have lit a small fire in front of our table.

Fans would actually take their chances and come over. I would overhear him talking with them as they remembered specific matches they saw him in back in the 90s, and he'd remember too. He'd talk about the match's finish and tell them some tidbit. Or they'd discuss the venue where some match was held. A fan was talking about an ECW show and asked if he had a DVD of it for sale. Balls shuffled through the loose DVDs and found a couple and handed them to the guy.

"Here, man," he told the fan. "Just take 'em, you don't have to pay. If you can remember shit like that from 20 years ago you deserve them!" That was Balls.

Of course *our* shit couldn't be sold with him blocking half the table. But you know what, it was okay. Balls had just taught me something.

When Balls was going to be on our *YouShoot* series, we set up a rib that we would play on him during the show. Balls' best friend growing up was Chris Candido, for whom Balls' son is named. Chris and Balls both became pro wrestlers and got to work with each other in ECW. As high school kids they were wrestling marks and hung out together. Chris died back in 2005 at 33 years-old from pneumonia. Balls' friend Damien Darling, Tammy Sytch's ex during some of her dark days, was going to attend the Balls shoot which, incidentally, was the afternoon shoot that day, to be followed

by a full turnaround for *Breaking Kayfabe with Marty Jannetty* that evening. Yeah. My day.

Damien contacted Johnny Candido, Chris's brother, about getting something of Chris's for the show. Johnny found a leather, *KISS Army* jacket that belonged to Chris back in the day. Damien brought it to the set and hid it in a bag. Balls had a firm appreciation for the occult so during the show we would do a game segment where Balls and I would use the Ouija board. Damien slipped the leather jacket under the chair while I was forcing the plastic planchette to spell *S-E-A-T*. After some confusion, Balls and I examined our seats and he found the jacket. He turned whiter than his normal pasty, sickly, shade of pale. He got a little translucent.

"That's...uh...that's...Candido's jacket." He recognized it right away. We all sat and donned blank faces, though we didn't really need to add to the situation. Balls was starting to shake.

What we *didn't* plant was what Balls found in the pocket of the jacket. He pulled out a folded up paper, which turned out to be an old ad for a wrestling clinic being taught by Ricky Steamboat. When Balls opened it, he was stunned. I was stunned when Balls said, "I went to this with Candido." It was still in the pocket of his old jacket.

We all just sat in silence as the camera rolled. Balls got up and unclipped his mic.

"Guys I gotta go out for a bit," he said and headed right out the door. We later told Balls about the rib after the shoot and he said he knew.

"I knew the whole time! Johnny told me," he insisted. Johnny says he didn't, so I don't know.

One summer evening we were vending our DVDs at another wrestling show that took place outdoors at a municipal pool club (can you just imagine the sales we logged at that one?). I talked with Balls for about a half hour about books he was reading and a new series about vampires that he was really into. He was in really good spirits and looked a little slimmer. He confirmed he was healthier, as only Balls could.

"I don't drink anymore," he said, deadpan and serious about his proclamation. "I don't do any drugs anymore, I don't do anything anymore. All I need are my opiates and I'm good." I stopped nodding along to his declaration of health and I must've worn a quizzical expression. "Oh dude, when I stop those, *then* I'm gonna drop dead. They keep me going." You just had to smile and shake your head, as you so often had to with him.

Balls Mahoney, known to his mom and Uncle Sam as Jon Rechner, must have stopped those opiates on his 44th birthday in April 2016. One day later he died on his couch of a heart attack. Every time I think of Balls Mahoney I don't think about him puking salmon or the gimmick table infringement. I don't think of our conversations and I don't even think of his work in ECW.

I think about little Christopher sitting backstage in the plastic chairs that line the walls in the Rahway Rec Center, playing his handheld game, waiting for his dad and hero to be finished working in the ring. Later in the night you could see Chris helping dad with his bags, walking to the car, just a step behind, ready to head home to the safety of his bed. And that stops me in my tracks whatever I am doing.

I learned that Johnny Candido stepped in and was helping raise Chris during this tough time. That great deed completes the Candido-Rechner cycle of friendship in a most critical way. I sent Johnny, who I'd never met, a DM and told him so.

. . .

The most unlikely ringmaster of ECW's madness, both in the action filled arenas and in the action filled Travelodge motel, was a figure who to this day resides in the ECW scorched earth of Philadelphia. Humble and generally unassuming to the uninitiated, this short, Papa Smurflike man of sixty-something strolls into the Philadelphia jewelry and pawnbroking institution, Carver W. Reed, Inc, every morning and opens the gates for another day in the family business. He was a familiar face in Philadelphia's world of business and commerce. He served as president of The Variety Club, a fundraising organization benefitting disabled children. Tod Gordon was a respectable businessman and philanthropist.

If you had added "whoremaster" to that list, you'd also be correct. *He* might tell you it was just Prodigy girls from the Internet.

If you had added "cocaine user" to that list, you'd also be correct. *He* would say it was lifestyle maintenance, ensuring he'd be up early for work the next day while running ECW.

While we are on ECW, if you had added "architect of the most violent, depraved organization to grace South Philly since the RICO statute," you'd also be correct. And I'm not sure he'd argue.

Tod Gordon is none of those last few things today and if you met him you'd never believe he was orchestrating and funding the violence in ECW, as well as the submissive prostitute for the afterparty. The workers in ECW, 2 Cold Scorpio initially, recited the phrase "Tod is God" for his cult leaderesque ability to keep workers nearly killing themselves in the ring every week and procuring life's pleasures as the carrot on the stick. Sounds like Beelzebub dressed as Jim Jones on Halloween.

Illustrating Gordon's elevation of a local pub operation to the religion for the fringe that ECW became in the mid 90s was our goal when I contacted him a few years ago to cover the larval years of 1992 & 1993 for the series *Timeline: The History of ECW.* Tod was immediately on-board and we went to work lining up a worker to sit beside Tod for the journey into those two years. The more we looked, the more we realized that there really wasn't any singular name that was there for the earliest days and then the ascension. I was confident that Tod would be fine to sit alone and make the journey with us. Yes, he'd been off TV for years, and it was Tod's one-time partner Paul Heyman that history has written as the man in the steering wheel for ECW. But there was really only *one person* that was there when ECW went from clumsy cards in strip clubs and sports bars through its establishing itself as the wrestling fan's alternative to a comatose WWE and an unwatchable WCW product. That one person was Tod Gordon.

We met Tod in the one-time ECW Arena, now called 2300 Arena. We shot the show on-location, which we never do, but this edition was special. It was to be the first in the chronology of the story, but the last actual release in the series. It seemed fitting to be in that venue with the guy that started it all. On the day of the shoot, Tod walked in after having not been inside for years and it was a cool thing to watch. The building had expanded into the warehouse next door so the current owners were able to put in proper restrooms, a large snack bar and dining area. It's no longer the claustrophobic, black box that served as the site for ECW tapings. Tod walked through trying to mentally retrofit the elements that were gone.

Tod's edition of *Timeline: The History of ECW* is an absolute must-see for any fan of ECW because it goes back to square one and describes the federation coming to life. He had near total recall of events and was able to fill in any gaps. He had never-before-told stories galore, from Hak's earliest days being banned from wrestling at Mike Schmidt's bar, to the entire ECW Arena standing and turning their backs on Tully Blanchard in a massive

sign of disrespect, while he worked in an ECW ring. Tod was, indeed, the perfect guest for this show.

A few months later we had him come back, this time for an edition of *YouShoot.* That same weekend, we had Tully Blanchard in town shooting an edition of *Timeline: The History of WCW.* I'd never met Tully before so Anthony and I took the opportunity to have Tully attend dinner at the hotel restaurant with the crew. I sat across from Tully and we were able to have enough icebreaker discussion to where he was comfortable when it came time to shoot later that night. It was careful stepping, though. Tully is a serious dude. He's become a Christian and has his own ministry, but there's still something in Tully's eyes. It's that same thing that made people think he was an asshole back on TV in the 80s. And that asshole might hurt you.

The dinner was fine, though. We got on well, but it was what was going *behind* Tully that was giving me a heart attack.

Finished with his *YouShoot* and with nothing else on his schedule for the night, Tod Gordon changed out of his suit and headed for the bar. You'd think he was wearing magnetic underwear as quickly as he was drawn to metal stools after wrapping on *YouShoot.* I'm not sure why Tod didn't eat dinner with us. I don't think the evening specials were kosher.

Tod throws his portly frame up onto a barstool near the end of the bar and spots us. He decides he will now become the devil's imp and have some fun. He's sending me distracting texts, first making fun of my pretending to be interested in Tully's conversation, and then stuff about Tully himself as I'm sitting across from him trying to have a conversation. I put the phone down and forget about it and forget about Tod. I have to. He's on fire over at the bar firing off texts.

This should have shut down Tod, but he's a better chess player than that. He sees the waitress hand me the check and Tod pays it for us–

Are you fucking kidding, believing that?!

No, Tod sees I have the check and he starts waving his hands to get my attention from across the room. I see the fucker, but I'm purposely ignoring him. He's smacking himself on his big dome, dropping his head into his hands and shaking his head. I have now paid, and I'm ready to go. I start to stand and I finally give Tod a full glance. He's pointing to his phone animatedly mouthing *Look at your phone!* I'm still listening to Tully as he now stands across from me. I'm smiling, nodding along. *Yes, tough to be a heel back in those days, lots of heat, I would imagine.*

I finally look at my phone to placate the garden gnome landing planes at the bar. His awaiting text informs me that while I was ignoring him, Tod has told the entire pub to stand and turn their backs on Tully when we leave.

I slide my phone away into my pocket and I don't sell for Tod. He may as well have thought I didn't read it. But he more than likely knew I did as I stayed standing and didn't walk. Tully's waiting on my cue to walk with me. I'm stretching. I pick up my coat three or four times, cleaning a stain that doesn't exist. Check my wallet, *did I get my card back?* All the while I'm watching the room, gauging if anyone is watching us to see when we leave, ready to stand and reenact the ECW Arena insult. They all look engaged in conversation or starving to death waiting for Yogi's Bar and Grill to serve some food. No one is looking at us.

I start to walk out, Tully goes ahead of me, and no one stands. As I pass Tod, I mouth *asshole* to him, and he collapses on the bar with laughter. I owe him one. I'm gonna make sure his next submissive whore has a cock.

Another ECW worker that made a splash for us was Perry Saturn. Perry was a 3-time ECW tag team champ as part of the duo The Eliminators. He'd go on to work for WCW and then WWE, and then he was gone.

No, he was really gone.

Perry Satullo, real name, very literally disappeared from view in the wrestling world and elsewhere. For years people would ask about him. *Did he die?* No, that was his partner, John Kronus. *Is he wrestling on the independents?* No one has advertised him for years. Where was Perry Saturn? And how can we get him on *YouShoot?*

Turns out Perry's life had taken a wicked turn after his having navigated the minefield of ECW for years. Perry had become homeless. He'd fallen into a meth addiction and was out on the streets. Prior to that he'd been shot in the neck when he happened upon a sexual assault in progress. There were two men accosting a woman late at night and Saturn stepped in and was shot for doing so. Addiction soon followed, and then he dropped out of society, a mystery to even his family and friends.

When Perry emerged from this and got clean we reached out and had him on *YouShoot.* His story was riveting and troubling and I was honored that Perry told the whole thing to us first. When we were shooting I was listening to this harrowing journey and I really felt Perry would make it. He was taking full accountability for what he'd gone through. He wasn't letting himself off the hook. He'd gotten clean before and then relapsed. He'd been

through the ringer. The Perry Satullo I sat with seemed real tired of fucking up and *being* fucked up.

11. Near Misses

Generally speaking, I turn down about 75% of the talent offered to us by promoters and booking agents. Sometimes I'll ask Anthony if he thinks there's anything we have for the particular person and we are usually on the same page. We have pretty specific needs for our shows, as I've said. There are two sides to that coin, though. If we did the traditional, career retrospective shoot interview then we could hire anybody. It wouldn't matter if they weren't a booker, or they didn't work atop the card for a full year in WWE, WCW, or ECW. It wouldn't matter if they weren't a loudmouth lightning rod who could generate lots of fan questions.

On the other hand, having so many diverse series allows us to work with certain talent multiple times. There are a handful of guys that can, and have, done all of the active shows on our slate. Jim Cornette has been a booker, so he was on *Guest Booker.* Is there a bigger mouth in wrestling? Probably not, so *YouShoot* was a natural fit. He's done *Timelines* for the WWE and WCW brands. You wouldn't exactly describe him as stable, so he ranted for a few hours on *Breaking Kayfabe.* We even did a roast for him. Kevin Nash is another name that has worked across several of our series. Hacksaw Jim Duggan has been with us more than once, as has Sean Waltman, Tammy Sytch, Kevin Sullivan, Shane Douglas, Vince Russo, Sandman (though he has no idea who I am), New Jack, and more.

Then there are the guys we *never* could get. Not yet, anyway. Some folks have passed away without our having been able to work with them, some are too old and in a bad way. Those folks, well there's just nothing we can do about them. Yes, it's a sin to have a show called *Guest Booker* and never to have had Dusty Rhodes on the show. It sucks to have a series like *YouShoot* and have been unable to have Bobby Heenan appear on it. The circle of life has taken many opportunities away from us.

There are other opportunities that have been lost for a host of other reasons. Take Mick Foley. For our *Timeline: The History of WWE* series, we kept the 1998 edition aside for Mick Foley. That was a huge year for him and I think he and I would have had a great chemistry. Mick did *Ring Roasts 2: A Tribute to Terry Funk*, but I could never get him back for *Timeline,* and I tried.

Not long after we shot *Ring Roasts 2,* one of the KC guys ran into Mick at an event. When they asked him if he ever got a copy of the DVD, he said he didn't. They asked him if he'd like one, to which he smiled and said, "No, I'm good." That was like a kick in the balls.

Several years after *Ring Roasts 2,* we had a vendor table at an event at which Mick was appearing to sign autographs. I grabbed a few copies of *Timeline: The History of WWE* off our table and headed over to Mick and waited for his long line to die down. Everyone loves Mick. He's an everyman. Fans see themselves in Foley, as he was an unlikely WWE star. He's dumpy, not chiseled. He's hairy and his ring attire is a ratty, plaid shirt and sweats. The guy working at the warehouse sees Mick Foley and thinks he, too, can succeed. Well, I looked across the gymnasium and saw Mick signing and thought *he, too, can be on* Timeline.

Too often we are sunk by the shoot interview genre having been given a shitty name by poorly produced shows in this market, with no production value beyond taking the lens cap off and hitting a button. Before us, shoot interviews weren't written particularly well and there was no thought given to competent hosting. It's alarming if you read that with no knowledge of this market, but it's all true. I suppose at one time some of the charm of the shoot interview was its raw, unprepared quality. But after the first few that were truly shot on the fly as talent popped in and had a few hours to kill, why there wasn't an attempt to legitimize the genre by better producing shows is beyond me.

I walked to Mick Foley with DVDs in hand to show him and explain that our series is not only important to the historical retelling of the sport, but that we are also a professional production outfit with which he should be proud to be associated. Bruno has a year in the series. Bret has a year. Roddy has a year. So too should Mick. This was an important, well-researched and well-produced compendium that will be seen as important. This wasn't, *hey Mick, would you do a shoot interview?* This was *Mick will you represent the year 1998 in* Timeline: The History of WWE? To my mind, there was a big difference.

We exchanged pleasantries and I showed Mick the discs and asked if he would take the year 1998.

"Mick," I said, "I could not, in good faith, produce a series called *The History of WWE* and not have you be a part of it." I wanted him to know we were serious about having him do this year.

"I might have something going on with WWE where I couldn't do this," he said. "I'll know more in a couple of weeks." I told him I'd check back.

This WWE excuse is a valid one, I suppose. Sometimes they're explicitly restrictive, spelling it out that workers can't do competitive company videos. Strange, that sounds like a W-2 employee wherein a company can restrict one's activities. As far as I know, a 1099 independent contractor can work for *anyone.* It's the age-old wrestler's gripe with WWE and they've tried to fight it in court. One day the wrestlers will win. This has been an egregious violation of their rights for a long time.

I tried twice making a formal offer to Mick beyond this discussion. Most recently, the response he sent back to me was "not interested." The year 1998 was a huge year for Mick, but it was a huge year for WWE as a whole, and the man working as the head writer in 1998 was Vince Russo. Russo did the year for us and it was a great edition of the series.

Other than the WWE excuse, the one we get most frequently is "the book." There are lots of wrestlers walking around keeping their stories close to the vest for use in their book. Tommy Dreamer has been writing a book for about five years, I think. I've tried to get him for a couple of projects and both times I got "the book." Meanwhile, he's done other shoot interviews for his friends. I suppose he just didn't tell the stories that will appear in his very large book. As I mentioned before, when I finally got face time with Pat Paterson, I also got "the book." I read his and it's very good.

I tried for Bob Backlund more than once. Bob worked for us on The Iron Sheik's *Ring Roast* but I need Bob for a year in *Timeline: The History of WWE*. I have a good working relationship with the guy that books Backlund down in this area and the money has just never been right. Not long ago I talked with him about getting Bob on the series and I got "the book." The book is out now, so we will knock on that door again. It won't be "the book" this time, and hopefully "the money" has gotten a little more realistic by now.

I had a money thing with Ted DiBiase recently also. Our series *Back to the Territories with Jim Cornette* sits Corny down with someone that was heavily involved with a classic wrestling territory. In season one we wanted to cover the Mid-Atlantic territory. The biggest stars for Bill Watts's legendary territory were Junkyard Dog (dead), Ted DiBiase, and Hacksaw Jim Duggan. We made an offer to DiBiase through a third party who was bringing him into our area when we were going to be in production with Jim Cornette. Ted turned it down on account of the money offer. I held firm and thanked the agent, and let him know that I felt it was very fair, given the current market.

I was immediately on the phone with an agent to get Duggan. We'd worked with Jim before and we got on quite well for a great edition of *Timeline: The History of WWE*. While waiting for an answer on Duggan, DiBiase's booking agent sent me a text that he wants Ted to take the gig and told him so. He took a screenshot of the texts and Ted's reply to him was, *Trust me, I know these guys all take these videos and show them all over the place and make a fortune.*

Ted had shown himself to be disconnected from reality. He's not alone. I deal with talent all the time that judge the money offer as somehow connected to *their* worth. They equate the offer to their place in history. They make the offer personal. It's such flawed thinking.

The only thing that matters in putting together a money offer is the *market.* Any production company putting together a budget is doing so with *only* the expected range of return for that particular show in mind. It has nothing to do with the fact that the talent was NWA champion, WWE champion, or the Million Dollar champion. Eric Simms, for all his quirks, always asks me, "What's the budget?" He doesn't say, "What do you want to pay my guy?" He gets it. It's all about the budget. Imagine agreeing to pay a ton of money to someone who you *know* will not drive significant

returns in sales? How awful an owner would you be? Actually, you wouldn't be an owner for long.

Kevin Nash, one of the most infamous sticklers for money and the business of doing business, asked me for a raise on his rate for his second outing with us. We'd filmed *Timeline: The History of WWE* with him and we wanted him for *YouShoot.* He accepted and asked if we could kick the rate up by 50%. I explained that the market is fucked. Piracy is out of control and there's a pervasive notion by anyone under 35 years old that any digital media, no matter the expense in producing it, is free. Plus, media as a whole is overcrowded. I asked him how his Screen Actors Guild residual checks looked lately. I was living it firsthand as well. As an actor there was a time when you could do okay with a movie's afterlife, back when people bought DVDs. Today's digital releases generate garbage returns now with Netflix and all these streaming outlets charging dick for their service, and therefore, paying less than dick to those of us who create the stuff. Today the residual money is in TV, due to reruns, syndication, and the advertiser money still being okay for TV networks. You think all these movie stars are now doing TV for the art of it? Used to be considered a rung down from film. Not since movie residual payments sank well below TV residuals.

Kevin agreed with the philosophy and did the show for the previous rate. As a matter of fact, with both of us on close terms since the first time we worked together, Kevin has *never* asked me about money ever again, on any of the shows he's done for us since. He says *yes,* or *I don't think I can get that into my schedule that week.*

Kevin also understands the bigger picture. He knows friendship with me makes other things easier up here. When an agent was fucking up his travel arrangements, for which we had no benefit as we weren't shooting with him, I called the guy and handled it. I know how Kev needs to travel. When a promoter dropped the ball getting him to the airport after a show, I got Kevin, who can play the diva sometimes, a Town Car to take him out to LaGuardia at my expense. It's worth it to keep marquis talent happy. I also left the KC set and went to the venue to tell Kevin about the arrangement. Kevin, the delicate, damsel in distress–*dude, they want me to ride with some cat I don't even know??? Some guy picks me up, another one driving me to you, and then someone else driving me later? I just don't appreciate the musical chairs.* He's the best. I would rescue the Prince. I told Kevin I would pick him up.

Okay, I did have ulterior motives for going down to that particular show. That promoter had tried to rob us on the *Bombshells* series that we were producing through him at the time. We caught him attempting to skim the girls' pay. On this day when we walked into the venue to patch up his shitty transportation plan for Kev, the promoter tried some bizarre power play, turning to security and telling them me and Anthony were not allowed backstage access. This made the pussy feel pretty big, I guess. The security dude very officiously ushered us to the house, where the stars were out signing autographs for fans before the wrestling card began. Kevin and Scott Hall were slated to open the show in the ring doing an NWO style promo, harkening back to their days doing exactly the same to mega ratings on WCW TV.

Sadly, Kevin wasn't at the venue for the show's open and the big NWO promo that night. He was in my car headed to my set. I'm patient. I will get my chance to fucketh you if you fucketh us. No one even knew he was gone. Perhaps except the very official security tool who we walked right by on the way out. I hope Scott was great in the promo.

When Kevin trusts you, you're in. But in the bigger picture, he gets the business. He gets *our* business.

Let's talk business for a minute. (If you haven't any interest in the finances and intricacies of navigating this market, skip ahead. There's probably a story about Tod Gordon dominating some submissive in a hotel room with 2 Cold Scorpio coming up soon.) Ten years ago when we started, if you wanted to learn about the inner workings of pro wrestling you had a couple of options. You could pay for Dave Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer Newsletter,* or the like. There were a couple of others as well. You could find some obscure Internet radio show. You could read a wrestler's autobiography. Or lastly, you could buy a shoot interview, and there were just a few producers doing it regularly. That was about it.

Business was stable and everyone knew how the business of wrestling shoots, in any of the above forms, functioned. Wrestlers were paid by book publishers or shoot producers. Fans paid for product. It was a cyclical thing, it worked. It was a fair and reliable system for wrestlers and producers. A big wrestling name drove big product sales. Therefore, the decent names in wrestling could command a good price. Producers like us would pay it because there would be increased return there.

The wrestling stars also retained value because their stories were told in just those select outlets. Today the market is so saturated and wrestlers are telling their stories, their last remaining product if having left the ring, for free. There are 10,000 wrestling podcasts and legends are on all of them telling their stories *for free.*

So what effect has this had on our business? Well, to start with, the legends have devalued themselves by devaluing their last remaining commodity–their history. Fans have heard the story on four podcasts this week. As a result there are fewer viewers who would pay for them, so I certainly won't be offering any significant money for that talent to appear on Kayfabe Commentaries programming that will have weak sales. That legend has been on all these podcasts and made nothing from them. If they now do our show, they'll make less than if they weren't overexposed.

Next, the entire shoot industry gets undervalued as a swarm of incompetent, unimaginative producers of base, lackluster programming have their *oh, I can do that* moment. They try. They overpay talent to a ridiculous degree, throwing the entire market out of whack. They conduct poor interviews with little to no production value and throw them up on YouTube for nothing, getting very little return other than the pittance Google pays for ads. A big, fat waste of everyone's time.

They saturate the market along with WWE Network, now trying to emulate the shoot interview on almost every non-wrestling show on the streaming channel. Fans get weak product, having to sift through dozens of sources for wrestling talk every week. Legitimate producers get lost in the shuffle. Wrestling legends will not ever again get the money they once did from legitimate producers like us. And fans, most times, are not getting quality programming like they did from legitimate producers like us. Fans think they win because there's all this "free" shoot programming, but they don't. Everyone loses in today's model.

It is my hope that it will soon change. The freebie kids can't last. Eventually daddy's money runs out. If it's their personal money funding the hanging out with wrestlers for no return on the investment, then eventually they may meet a girl and have to explain the gross expenditures on this hobby and not her. That's pretty unlikely though.

Look, I don't begrudge someone making a run at this business. They would come along every so often and tell us that we were their inspiration. I've heard that very phrase from competing companies now defunct, and

podcasts now operating. It's flattering when the garage band or opening act honors us like that. But there are elements to this overexposure and underpayment that have a detrimental effect on the market, for every participant on all sides of the camera and computer alike.

So back to Ted DiBiase and his belief that he knew my market better than I. I got word back pretty quickly that Duggan was in. That made me happy, as I think sales with Duggan and Cornette would have been comparable to anything DiBiase would sell with Cornette.

The next day I get a text from the guy booking DiBiase. I guess the concept of *I could have this amount, or I could have nothing* set in a bit. DiBiase would now do it for my original offer. As I'd learned from my days in real estate, the best negotiator is time. People do a number on themselves when they sit and think, second-guessing, fearing they'll lose a deal. I would just sit back and wait.

In this case, I thanked the agent for his efforts but in initially turning me down, DiBiase had gotten Duggan hired. And that was that.

. . .

Sometimes there's really no reason at all that we can't chronicle the contributions of a star and work with them. I was recently at an event and had the chance to speak to Ricky Steamboat for the first time ever. I explained the concept of our *Timeline* shows and Lanny Poffo, who was with Ricky, vouched heavily for us. Ricky said he'd consider it if the money was right. Of course, Rick, of course. That's a given. We parted, having had a good discussion.

Within the year I reached out to Ricky through a third party and offered him an edition of a new show we launched called *Supercard*. We wanted Ricky to come on and discuss one of his great pay-per-views he headlined with Ric Flair. Ricky turned it down because he was "scared about WWE." That was the exact quote I got back. Ricky was no longer employed in any way by the WWE that I was aware of. They weren't paying him a salary. Yet the shadow cast by them causes Ricky to turn down money from a valid source. That's a shame.

We also had an episode of *Breaking Kayfabe* ready to go for Sid Vicious. If you remember, that series focuses on the people behind the wrestling personas. A large part of Sid's show was written to focus on the pervasive

notion that Sid was problematic to hire. From a talent standpoint, Sid was a test tube pro wrestler. He had the perfect look–he was a huge, chiseled monster. His promos, while sometimes clumsy, were loaded with intensity. According to the checklist, Sid should have been one of the biggest stars ever, and should have worked far longer than he did.

Sid's great look and intensity aside, he began to be seen as unreliable. He reportedly no-showed gigs. He has lost dates during softball season due to his passion for the sport. When the hell *is* softball season?

Sid had done a shoot interview with another company before but, outside from some podcasts, has not appeared on a shoot program in some time. We thought this would be a good get for us. But talking about the upcoming booking was always accompanied by a disclaimer about the great possibility that this wouldn't happen. I'm always one to give someone the benefit of the doubt, so through the frivolity we pressed on and were ready to go. The suite was booked, contractors hired, show written, and my suit pressed and in the garment bag.

Around 11:00 a.m. on the day we were to shoot, I got a text from another shoot producer letting me know, as a courtesy, that he heard Sid was not on the plane. I immediately texted the promoter through whom we booked Sid. He said he didn't have details yet, he'd get back to me. Well, that sure as shit didn't sound like *Sid's on the flight and will be here in a couple of hours.* I waited impatiently for the promoter, who had Sid advertised to headline two days of shows for his company, to call with news.

He got back to me with the inevitable, and an explanation from Sid. Mr. Vicious would not be boarding a flight that day. Seems he lost his wallet at the airport and wouldn't be able to fly. Not that morning. Not two hours from then. And, I guess, not at all. He had to get right to work finding the wallet, and straightening out the ramifications of its loss. Our loss was negligible. We didn't pay anything. I cancelled the suite, told our contractors there was no payday that weekend, and scratched the show from the release calendar. No loss, really. Just no Sid.

Not long after working with Dixie Carter and the TNA office, I got word that Abyss, real name Chris Park, was a big fan of our work. I was given his number and we traded some calls and texts over time. Chris was an incredible performer. Abyss was the last real monster heel and he played it with the terror necessary to allow TNA a compelling, dangerous threat in

angles. Chris went on to do a lawyer gimmick also, but I liked the Abyss character better. I think that could have gone the distance.

At a Legends of the Ring convention, we were set up and shooting a full slate of shows when I was told Chris was there and wanted to say hello in person. He was brought to the breakout room where we were shooting and he couldn't have been nicer. Chris is probably the nicest guy I've ever met in the business. He was humble and so grateful for my compliments. In turn, I was greatly flattered by his words to me. After our 5-minute love-fest I suggested he sneak in and shoot a segment for the next season of *Wrestling's Most.* He came in and we did his countdowns.

Chris and I didn't talk again for a while. I saw he was going to be around the area on a TNA loop so I reached out to him. I wanted to get him on *YouShoot* because he was so personable. I was a little concerned that he might just be too nice a guy for a *YouShoot,* but I was willing to take that chance with him. It could still be an entertaining show even if the 'ho bag' didn't exactly overflow. We went over his schedule with TNA and saw he had a gap on the Friday in between his flight and the first arena. We could pick him up, shoot our show, and still get him to the venue in plenty of time.

I was happy to finally work with the Monster Abyss. He was glad we finally hooked up as well. But he did want to run it by the office. At the time he was still a major figure on TNA TV and was a draw on their cards.

He called me back after speaking with Bob Ryder who said they'd "prefer he didn't do it." This was strangely the *exact* same way WWE put it to Bruno Sammartino when he told them he made a commitment to us. There must be a handbook for companies that designate their talent 1099 independent contractors so, therefore, they can't explicitly tell them *not* to do something for another producer. By telling Chris, "you can't do that show" then TNA would have crossed that line into having an actual *employee* working for them. Full-time W-2 employees get health benefits and the companies pay payroll taxes.

Chris was very apologetic but I couldn't blame him. That thing in Chris that made him abide so loyally to TNA's "suggestion" is what makes Chris the great guy he is. Maybe in the remaining years in TNA they'll fuck him around enough and prime him for *YouShoot.*

12.Metamorphosis

Ten years of doing this has brought me great pride and confidence, in large part due to the decisions we made working so well. The things I thought to be true in my heart often proved that way when put to the test. Then there were the humbling moments where I could not explain why something I thought to be true, and that had once been shown to be so, had fallen apart. As quickly as you can bend your arm patting yourself on the back, it can wrap around your throat.

I was always aware that we were the innovators in our industry. With that comes a great responsibility in guarding that position. I'd written a report for the team here a few years ago and presented it at a quarterly meeting. I detailed what I called the "innovator's curve." I illustrated the lead-time an innovative company has before the pack can mobilize and start imitating you. Once they do, you'd better be on to the next thing and leave them chasing the cold bait. So you always have to be heading on to the next thing. In our case, for years it was either new content delivery modes like KC OnDemand or KC Downloadz. There were times where just our production values, multi-camera setup, and innovative shows were enough to innovate the stagnant shoot market.

Back in 2015 we had a few shows that we thought would start the next "curve." Shoot-style programming was being emulated on podcasts and WWE Network and perhaps every story has already been told. We were of the mindset that new formats would need to be introduced to ensure our

survival in the crowded market. All three new series that we greenlit would have celebrity hosts and I would step aside. I would keep hosting the *Timelines*, *YouShoot* and *Breaking Kayfabe*. But I wanted to add hosted programming that, we thought, could take us to a level beyond the shoot interview. In my mind, this was really 2.0. Well, maybe *we* were 2.0 in 2007. So this was 3.0.

When we were shooting *Timeline: The History of ECW* with Raven, we got to kicking around some ideas during down time. I pitched him the idea of critiquing a wrestler. Watching an indie guy work and then sitting him down and giving him advice might be amusing. That kind of snowballed into doing a character makeover show. I knew Raven would be great for that kind of show due in part to his knowledge of the sport and character, but also his verboseness and natural ability to rub people the wrong way. He'd be perfect for this.

I went to work partnering with an indie federation so we would have venues, locker rooms, young makeover candidates, and a booker willing to allow Raven to do this on a fairly regular basis. Though there was lots of talk prior to shooting about what the character makeovers would be, but the one thing we couldn't prearrange was the true litmus test when we sent the new character Raven created out to the ring that night. The fans would basically decide on the success or failure of the makeover. How did the fans sound? Did they accept the character? Cheer them? Laugh at them? Was the desired effect accomplished?

Nothing like this reality/makeover show had ever been attempted in the shoot interview world. Actually I didn't think the term *shoot interview* was even really accurate in describing what we did any longer. The one series that probably still fit that description was *YouShoot.* Outside of that, *Timeline* was a historical retrospective. *Guest Booker* was a profile of the creative minds in the business and *Breaking Kayfabe* probed the outside the ring lives of the people behind the characters of the sport. Now we'd added a makeover program with *Raven's Restler Rescue* in an effort to explore a completely new genre and at the same time start that next innovator's curve.

The format of *Raven's Restler Rescue* saw young, somewhat directionless talent being given new characters by Raven. They were renamed, outfitted in new garb, and coached on their in-ring behaviors and promos. Then they are sent to the ring for final judgment. We went into production and began

putting shows in the can and on the release calendar. We also began developing another unique guest-hosted series.

We'd discussed creating programming that covered the world of women's wrestling for a long time. We couldn't zero in on a clear format and we didn't ever develop anything with a unique enough slant for a show. I would never give my vote to greenlighting anything that was just women wrestlers talking about women wrestling for the hell of it, without a unique point of view.

Through the independent federation that we were using for *Raven's Restler Rescue*, we were able to connect with the relaunch of a women's wrestling federation. The booker for the independent federation was running the women's promotion and so we were given *carte blanche* as far as access to the women in wrestling. We would basically be able to get almost anyone on the show but we needed to start with a host.

Choosing a host is very challenging because there are so many variables that are invisible until the person is actually doing the hosting. You won't know the player can't hit the ball until they're in the batter's box swinging. But we can do as much reconnaissance as possible before finding this out as I'm directing episode one. I can look at video of almost anyone I was considering as a host. I can easily spot that X-factor, if present, and I'd be able to see how well they engage with others. It's also a plus if they come up with their own questions. Sure, Anthony or I can write questions but if they don't come from the host organically during the show, it's obvious that they're not having a discussion. We don't ever want a host reading from a list.

Of the list of names I was given to consider as host, I thought Leva Bates was the clear frontrunner for what would become *Kayfabe Commentaries' Bombshells*. She had a very unique niche because she had a following as a gamer, cosplay model, and connoisseur of all things geeky. It was a quirky element to add to the rough and tumble world of wrestling. I sent some YouTube clips to Anthony to let him know why I thought it should be Leva. He agreed and I called her. She accepted and we lined up guests for our first shoot. That was our second new series we put into production and planned for release that year. I was confident that 2015 would be a year of new heights for us, complete with new and unique programming that would combat a stale shoot interview market and cut through the overcrowding we were seeing.

The discussions I had with Leva prior to the shoot date were general in nature. I just emphasized keeping the show in her voice, allowing her personality to shine through. She shouldn't go out there and be "a host." If she wanted to make a *Suicide Squad* reference, do it. If she had some obscure (to me) *Matrix* reference, go for it. Even if the women guests rolled their eyes, do it. Stay authentic. That's what the identity of the show would become. It would become Leva's show. It was a risk. It might turn some viewers off who found this, or her, annoying. But I thought it could generate a cult following and it fit into what my plan was for 2015–produce different stuff.

Kayfabe Commentaries' Bombshells was our second new series of the year and it wouldn't be our last. About a year before this, our old friend Gabe Sapolsky had been ready to host a series we'd greenlit called *chROHnology*, about Gabe's time booking for Ring of Honor. He would host and his guests would be wrestlers with whom he worked in ROH. They would go over their time together and the angles they worked on, storylines Gabe booked, and just generally what was going on at the time in the federation.

We formally announced the show in our e-newsletter. We hadn't shot anything. We had the format prepared and some production design done, like the logo. We did have some shoots scheduled, along with the guests. I think Homicide was the first guest scheduled.

Not long after the e-newsletter blast with the "coming soon" announcement for *chROHnology*, we got an email from an attorney at Sinclair Broadcasting, the owners of Ring of Honor. Here's some of it:

It has come to our attention that Kayfabe Commentaries has been making unauthorized use of ROH trademarks in connection with a program series titled "chROHnology."

I am attaching as Exhibit A: a screenshot showing an example of such unauthorized use in connection with promotional materials for the Program, including the statement "Ring of Honor Comes to KC," the capitalized and stylized ROH in the title of the program, and the multiple references to ROH in the description.

They went on, telling us to cease and desist, and that we were *clearly* trying to draw a connection between Ring of Honor and KC. Their assertion

that we were violating a trademark was wrong. We'd never duplicated their trademark, and they don't own the letters R, O, or H and if we chose to capitalize them in the middle of a word, like *chROHnology,* we can. Seeing as this was only a "coming soon," it didn't have a "Ring of Honor is a trademark of Sinclair Broadcasting" which it should have had in fine print in the ad.

Here's some of my reply to this lawyer:

Sinclair's mark is not being used nor will it be used in any fashion, as the font is different from any that ROH has used.

This entire project is akin to writing a book "The History of Coca Cola" whilst not violating the mark, which we haven't and won't. The product does not purport to be produced by ROH, and is instead a historical retelling of an entity in public consciousness.

Their assertions were wrong and I had no intention to drop the series. It would be cleaned up a bit more, I would splash an "unauthorized" in the title, but that's really all that had to be done. I called Gabe and he had some interesting news for me as well. Seems he got a letter from Sinclair too. Their concerns with him were less centered on trademark violation, and more on violating an imposed gag on disparaging comments about ROH, which he'd apparently signed upon his release.

I filled Gabe in as to what was going down on our end. I told him we were fully committed to the series and I wasn't comfortable making any changes that would compromise the show. Disclaimers and the like are cosmetic, but if Gabe is going to be weighing every word that comes out of his mouth, then that *would* compromise something.

Gabe was really torn about this. His company, Evolve Wrestling, and his partner company World Wrestling Network were on the verge of a big deal with WWE and their training ground federation, NXT. He wanted to do this series but also didn't want to make waves. I talked with him several times that day, the last being late that night. While we were talking and planning how to handle this, he cut me off.

"Hang on, this is Paul E on the other line calling me back about this. I'll call you right back." Gabe had reached out to his mentor, Paul Heyman, and the fate of my newest series would now apparently be decided by the former guru of ECW. What would the rebellious genius advise Gabe to do?

Paul took great chances for ECW and ran the company with reckless abandon and little regard for other companies. I was curious.

Heyman told Gabe not to do it. His stance was that the headache wasn't worth it, nor was potentially jeopardizing the coming Evolve/WWE/NXT deal. Gabe agreed and that closed the door on *chROHnology*, but opened another door for us.

Gabe may not have had any control at Ring of Honor any longer, but he did at Evolve. In addition, their partner, World Wrestling Network, was the distributor of our OnDemand content and also the exclusive carrier of Evolve's video-on-demand as well as their i-pay-per-views. With an easy deal, we thought we could probably get Evolve talent plus the video footage to add to an Evolve-centric show. Evolve didn't have the cachet that Ring of Honor did at one time, but I also knew something that no one else really did.

Evolve would soon become a feed-in for WWE's popular development show, NXT. Gabe would be priming talent for WWE television via their NXT show and we'd be able to profile this talent on a new series we could develop, as they head off to the presumable big time. It would be a rare opportunity and a very nice cap on Gabe and that person's time together before leaving the nest, so to speak.

The opportunity to have access to the match footage as well was a huge bonus. I pitched this to Gabe and he liked it, and soon we had the "ok" from WWN for use their footage of the matches. We were set to go. What would we call this show? Well, Gabe's federation was called Evolve and their select talent were headed to NXT...so naturally this was *Gabe Sapolsky's Next Evolution.* I remember asking Anthony for a title. I said "something like *Next Evolution*."

He said, "What about *Next Evolution?"* We were done.

The concept was that Gabe and a worker he booked and factored heavily into Evolve would sit down and watch the matches and provide a commentary to them. Unlike our attempts at the mp3 commentary tracks and later the *Ringside* series, we could now show the matches in full. I asked Gabe who he thought might be the first to go over to WWE/NXT. He thought they'd be interested in Chris Hero or Johnny Gargano. We brought them both in and put both episodes in the can on the same night. Sure enough, Gargano got the call not long after that. *Wouldn't ya know who won*

the pony! We launched the series with his edition as he was making waves in NXT.

In the space of a year we'd continued to produce our *YouShoots, Timelines,* and *Breaking Kayfabes* and added three brand new series hosted by noted faces from wrestling, including a reality makeover show and a women's show. We were definitely moving out of our conventional space and in doing so, I'd hoped, ensuring our future by generating programming insulated from podcasts and other companies. We went heavy on launching each premiere. For *Bombshells* we reached out to the popular female wrestling news site Diva-Dirt and bought their entire splash page for a week, and then the background for three weeks following.

For Gabe's series, *Next Evolution,* we had all the news sites covering the series launch, and Gabe used his available channels at Evolve and WWN to run press releases as well. Fortuitously this actually coincided with Gargano's going public with the fact that he was heading up to NXT. Our series launch was a great dovetail for the announcement.

For the launch of *Raven's Restler Rescue,* we approached *The Wrestling Observer/Figure 4 Weekly* and asked if we could run a video, a trailer for our new series, on their splash page. They'd not done this before for an advertiser. Money makes things happen. The folks at WON/F4W online ran the trailer for our new series on the front page. We were going heavy with advertising for our new shows letting the world know we were ready to take shoot programming into phase 3.0.

Problem was the world wasn't coming with us. The first series to launch was *Raven's Restler Rescue* in January and it opened soft, which may have been expected with such a new concept. People sometimes take a while to connect with a new concept. It's a show that's not a familiar format so word of mouth or curiosity have to intervene to complete what you thought would happen with advertising alone. The people are the people, in the most democratic sense. Don't argue with it. Just run the numbers in QuickBooks and let it tell you what to do.

In the case of *Raven's Restler Rescue* it wasn't a catastrophic opening. But it told me we didn't have a smash hit here. As optimistic as I tried to stay through the launch, there was a moment about a week before release that I stepped outside myself and judged the show, which was really quite good, from an objective standpoint. There were two people out there that *could* love this show–fans of shoot interviews that like all of the inside tips

and wisdom Raven imparts to the trainee; and fans of makeover-type shows that would think it was cool to see such a drastic repackaging of talent. If they both found the show, they might like it very much and it might expand viewership to a new segment of the marketplace.

I sent a 20-minute clip to a good friend who had been working as post production supervisor for a huge CBS show in L.A. In talking with him I verbalized my fears that this might be *too* inside and shooty for the casual fan of makeover shows, and *not* shooty enough for the traditional shoot interview viewers. I said, “I fear this will serve no master.”

One episode of a new series is not enough to make life or death decisions on a series’ fate. You have to give it a chance to catch on, so we were prepared to shoot and release 3 episodes of *Raven’s Restler Rescue* before we had the crucial discussion. We had done three editions of *Ringside* before pulling the plug and two of *My Side of the Story*. We would give it some time. The problem with that was we had two other new series launching that same year. *Bombshells* was coming next at the end of May 2016, and *Next Evolution* was coming in July. Along with this, *Raven’s Restler Rescue* would be releasing its additional episodes throughout this time too. This is a lot of new material in a short span.

Why? Why had I invested so heavily in not one new series, not two, but *three* new series in one frigging year? If they all opened soft and occupied spaces we could have used for our traditional releases that could be catastrophic. I was hoping that the soft numbers on *Raven’s Restler Rescue* were to be short lived. Some reviews were trickling in and writers were enjoying it, if not wondering a thing or two about some of Raven’s decisions during the makeover. But never mind that, they liked him and we were on our way to the big release of *Bombshells.* We had the Diva Dirt front page and we would definitely reach that audience.

Bombshells opened even softer than *Raven’s Restler Rescue.* I told Leva and Raven, the hosts of those shows, respectively, that it was new and would likely take some time. I hoped the hell so! I had about 6 slots on the annual release calendar devoted to these 3 new series. Losing the all those releases to titles that were weak could destroy us. Those slots could have been filled with *YouShoots*, *Timelines,* and *Breaking Kayfabes*. We needed viewers to give *Raven’s Restler Rescue* a shot and see that tomorrow’s shoot interviews were going to look a little different.

Bombshells had me a little more worried though. We'd bought all that space on Diva Dirt and had Leva and Mia Yim, one of the guests on the series premiere, tweet all their followers about the show. We undoubtedly reached our market with the message. If there was some doubt as to whether or not the word got out, then you could always hold out hope that episodes two and three would make the necessary noise to gain eyeballs. But we knew we had reached our market by going right to the fans of women wrestling, and of Leva and Mia specifically, and they didn't respond.

A larger problem was that our core market didn't either. We had another edition of *Bombshells* in the can and one on the production schedule. We always thought there was no harm in committing to three editions of a series before deciding its fate. However in this case, I felt like *Bombshells* could have gone right then and there. I was willing to eat episode 2 and cancel production on episode 3. This was different than a slow open, hoping for the audience to come on-board. This was rejection by the very audience the show served.

I put a ton of effort into the post-production of the show and making sure it had a flavor that matched Leva's style. From the music right down to the superhero animations and font, I made sure it felt consistent with what she brought. We also had permission from an independent women's wrestling company to air matches. We had wrestling footage of each of our guests on the shows so the fans that liked the personality segment had the interview to keep them entertained, and the guys that liked the girl-on-girl action (in the ring, assholes) had full matches on each show.

Well the lesson here is that you can think, plan, and execute right according to your blueprint and think you have all bases covered. It really just comes down to the cold, almighty dollar. That's how viewers vote. There seems to be no rhyme or reason at times, but there doesn't need to be. We had to learn to stop thinking and just look at the damn numbers. Arguing with data or trying to enchant a spreadsheet is rather ridiculous. My instincts said to cut bait and move on from *Bombshells.* We did end up releasing episode 2 and we shot number 3. Both were mistakes.

July came and we launched *Gabe Sapolsky's Next Evolution.* We had all the advertising behind it, as well as the rub in the press releases that allowed us to say the guest was WWE-bound. Gabe did fine as host and he plugged the series on Twitter and WWN even pitched in and ran ads in their

newsletter blasts. I wrote copy that was read between matches on Evolve's iPPV that month. Could we have gotten any more exposure for it? Likely not.

Yet, here we had another case of logic being defied by the market and, make no mistake, the market is *always* right.

Three new shows, thousands of dollars, lots of time and effort on design, massive advertising and we came up short right across the board. It was crushing. Don't lose the lesson.

13. Playing Our Music

We had a few grim company meetings here. I'm sure the fellas at KC were likely not happy with a lot of the business decisions I had to make. Those hard decisions aside, the one thing that was clear to me that we had to was go back to doing what got us here. My instincts about changing up the variety in what we were producing and getting new hosts to drive new viewers was simply proven wrong. We fought it for a bit, but I'd ignored what I'd said so many times during meetings when we talked about our fans.

I always knew our fans were different. They're not just customers and we don't make soap, as I've been wont to say. We play to their passion, they're *beyond* customers...they're fans. They called themselves the Kayfabe Commandos and so many of them were on-board with everything we produced. It's why I always go to the music analogy. Our relationship with them is far more like that than anything else. Business books and consultants wouldn't be able to understand what happens when your fans feel like you can read their minds and you're cranking out programming that connects with their passions. It's a heavy thing and they kind of feel like they own you. And in a way, they do.

It was frustrating reading posts that said, *c'mon guys, what the hell are you making?* We were straying from them in an attempt to stave off extinction at the hands of the market clutter. But in doing so we were alienating our base. Some of them tried the new stuff, but we changed the tunes, went unplugged, and the lead singer wasn't out there in front. They rejected it. We stopped playing the music that made us.

A big part of the reality of having alienated our fan base was my moving behind the camera. I had to accept something that Anthony had been saying for years, ever since I brought up hosting less. I was part of that flavor and fans had become used to it. Sure, we were sometimes the butt of brutal criticism but doesn't that always happen when your favorite garage band breaks out and becomes discovered by tons more fans? That group doesn't belong to just you anymore. I watched that journey first hand and I can absolutely tell you we went from darlings of the Internet when we were

barely getting noticed, to the trolls' favorite target once we were globally recognized as the absolute best at what we do. It's how it is in entertainment when fans give you their hearts. *Guns n Roses sold out, maaan! Yankees suck! Hamilton is so overrated.*

If we were going to change the tides here, because it had been about a year or so, we'd have to get right. And fast. We'd have to get these releases that weren't working off the release slate and get back to our classics, but also our new stuff had to be the kind of programming that was KC all the way. And I had an idea for a show that would get us back to playing our music.

Undoubtedly, the show that had become our high watermark was the *Timeline* franchise. The series had become more and more popular with fans as years went on. It was the perfect illustration of what we had become in our industry. We were master storytellers with a historical twist. We gave everyone a peek at what they weren't supposed to see. The series had grown and came to identify us. At one time we'd heard ourselves referred to as "those *YouShoot* guys." Now, more and more, we were "the *Timeline* guys."

The *History of WWE* series quickly proved a successful format and we soon spun it off into a *History of WCW* series and a *History of ECW* series. Those three companies had the richest histories and underwent such highs and lows. Each edition in the series, each year profiled, could be so very different from the prior. The companies, particularly WWE and WCW, had very defined eras that would make the series have great variety. For example, look at the WWE in 1980 with Bob Backlund at the top of the card. Think about what TV looked like. Think about what the monthly cards at Madison Square Garden looked like. That 1980 edition of the WWE *Timeline* series with Larry Zbyszko covered a locker room with the likes of a Baron Mikel Sicluna, Tony Atlas, Tony Garea, and the like. A main event in MSG might end with a Boston crab, elbow drop (not from the top rope, mind you), or a sunset flip, which would have been cause for some real electricity in the crowd. It was the drama, not the danger, that moved fans.

Now jump ahead just four years. In the 1984 edition of the show we would be talking with "Rowdy" Roddy Piper about cable TV, Hulk Hogan, 1,000 licensed products, and a record album with wrestlers *singing*, for Christ's sake. Guys like Barry Windham and Mike Rotundo were flying all over the ring. The Spoiler was walking the top rope. It was all about the

spectacle. If you add a few years to that, we would be ready to head into the 90s and talk about the near-collapse of an empire. Steroid scandals, sex scandals, Vince headed to trial, pig farmers, garbage men, and hockey goons in the ring. This was the worst of the worst.

Heading to the mid-90s we began to see rebirth in its most provocative form. The "Attitude" era would arrive, with characters like The Rock, Mick Foley/Mankind, "Stone Cold" Steve Austin, and more badasses who skirted that line of heel and babyface. You could no longer tell who you were supposed to hate and who you were supposed to cheer. *Monday Night Raw* was a ratings juggernaut and would put up remarkable numbers. Wrestling began to crossover into mainstream entertainment again for the first time since the mid-80s.

See how varied those editions of our show were? People often ask me if we would be doing a *Timeline: The History of TNA.* How varied would those editions of the show be? From year to year, did we really have that much change in TNA? How many eras have they had?

As we sat with the underperformance of *Raven's Restler Rescue, Bombshells,* and *Next Evolution,* I thought about those *Timelines.* They were so rich, layered. There was so much to digest and the guests had so much to talk about. I loved the historical aspect but I also think there's a lot of nostalgia in those shows for fans. Those years of wrestling programming provided so many people with great memories in their formative years. I wanted to capture that spirit with a new series.

I loved an *Investigative Special* we did with J.J. Dillon called *Being a Horseman.* We recreated an actual 7 days in the life of The Four Horsemen. J.J. had his date book from that week in 1987 with a ton of details written in it. We were actually able to construct a shoot-simulation of that week. I went berserk in editing with graphics and sound effects to create the sense of being back there. A big part of what we do is both time travel and serving up the warm feelings that can recreate.

Considering both formats, the chronological exploration of a *Timeline* and the detailed recreating of a short time frame like *Being a Horseman,* I came up with *Supercard.* Whereas *Timeline* relived a year, *Supercard* covered the lead-up to one, huge pay-per-view or important wrestling card. We would sit with a guest from that particular mega event and they would take us through their participation in it. I was excited about it from the moment I was writing the format. I was able to give Anthony the four or

five sections I envisioned each show would go through. The skeleton was simple. It was all very clear to me–the questions I'd ask, the places I'd lead the guest in order to construct the definitive word on wrestling's great nights. Hey there's the tagline: "Re-Experiencing Wrestling's Greatest Nights."

That's what we do. *That's* what we had to get back to doing.

Rather quickly I suggested King Kong Bundy as our first guest in the series. Anthony started writing and the scripts for these would be much looser than the *Timelines.* That can be scary. When I see 65 pages of *Timeline* hit my inbox from Anthony with a thud, I will, of course, trim it down. But those 65 pages tell me we have a show, full and rich in content. Unless the guest is a moron, it's all in the writing and research.

Breaking Kayfabe is very little writing. I always wanted that show to be much more of a conversation. Anthony does research and sends me topics, news articles, book excerpts, and some suggested questions about where it can go. I read it all, but you know how much I transfer to the blue cards? Just words, concepts. One line might say "own worst enemy," or "legacy destroyed." I want to give myself imagery and through the discussion, I want the guest to recant stories and realizations that act as mini-movies with those titles I have on the blue cards. There may 20 or so phrases and images. If I can get the guest to paint the stories I have in my head and we get 10 or 15 of those mini-movies, it's a good show. I never show the cards to the guests, or crew, or even Anthony. They are my little story I told in my head before interviewing the guest, and my job is to get them to do it in their voice. The show is billed as "part interview, part therapy...all shoot." It can't be too rigidly prepared. I have to dance with each guest differently.

That show, *Breaking Kayfabe*, is a challenge that some would be terrified of. You walk into a set with 20 phrases written on 3 or 4 cards and you sit down, conscious of the fact that you have to get two hours of riveting programming out of a guest. There's almost no written content for me to anchor myself to. But that's *exactly* why the energy of that show is so amazing. It's my favorite series to do because these guys don't get people talking to them on-camera. People talk *at* them. They machine gun questions at them. I do a lot of listening and within a few minutes, the guests' arms are no longer crossed and they aren't leaning all the way back in their chair, recoiling from me. Their defenses are down. It is safe here,

and I will know them for who they are. They have a shot at it here: redemption, sincerity, and perhaps love.

You laughing? That show has had more than a few tears shed by guys with more scars than I have had careers. People may be different races, genders, with different experiences, outlooks and opinions. But that's the outer shell that you work through with someone. When you get to someone's soul, you see that we all love the same way. All those tears on *Breaking Kayfabe* were about one thing...love. Watch the shows.

The one exception to all of this was when Jim Cornette was on. There's no pain he's dealing with. No love. Just anger. So that's what he brought to the table, as he proceeded to rail against Ring of Honor for three hours, calling out everyone who made his time there miserable. But that was the only exception. Hey, we want to expose the real person. That's Jim. There's always an enemy *du jour.*

As for *Supercard*, we went lighter on the writing again. We laid the tracks but, truthfully, it would all happen (or not) on set, under the lights, in front of the cameras. I wasn't anchored to many pages, though I am holding much more than *Breaking Kayfabe* but nowhere near a *Timeline.* There was a lot of open time up there under the lights, considering the slight script size. For this show I want details from the guest. I love the minutiae of shows like this. In *Timeline* I have to cover twelve months in a few hours so I can't drill down as much as I'd like. But here in *Supercard*, I can. I didn't want a script pulling me along. I'd forget to ask who drove.

I got on the phone with Chris, Bundy's real name, and pitched him the show. I worked with him for the two *Ring Roasts* so there was some rapport there. This was the first time I was putting the concept to a real, potential guest, so this description was as much for my practice as it was his ears. He wasted no time in cutting me off.

"Yeah, Sean, I don't really care about all that," he began. "I'm sure it'll be fine. You know me. I'm all about the money. What are we talking on pay?" I knew he was all about the money. I also know he asked a high rate. I told him what I saw as fair pay for this. He balked. Actually, in his own, inimitable way, he loudly expressed shock, probably clutched his heart and bugged out his eyes at the insult. Bundy is great. Worker to the bone.

So it was time for the "reality" discussion. I explained the market to Chris. There is a new paradigm here. I thought our offer was fair. I presented my case eloquently and with solid reasoning.

Chris might be a worker, but he's also very intelligent. His response was the one and only time a wrestler made me thoughtfully reconsider an offer.

"Yeah, now that you mention it I do realize that about the market, Sean. It's probably real hard to make a buck. But you got something I don't."

"What's that?" I asked.

"You got time. Sean, do you realize that you will *own* this footage in perpetuity? Long after I'm dead, you can sell this. I only have so long to spend that money. But you can sell this forever. Forever is a long time."

I have negotiated hundreds of shows and walked away much more often than I reconsidered an offer. He was so damn creative with that shit that he made me pause. Now, I didn't pay him what he wanted, but we found a comfortable enough figure. I can tell you that it was 100% due to his ability to present a new perspective to me. Think about it, what could you possibly respond to that?

King Kong Bundy would be the first guest on *Supercard* and we would cover his steel cage main event against Hulk Hogan at *Wrestlemania 2*. The show was great, but it's greatest moment, as usual, you never saw. It was a huge embarrassment for me and I can finally tell it. I fucked up, big time.

In the course of the interview we got to talking about WWE road agents of the past, like Tony Garea, Rene Goulet, and the late George "The Animal" Steele. I asked him if he got along with Steele because I thought he had some heat with Bundy. King hadn't known about any heat so asked me what I heard. I thought I remembered a story from Steele's edition of *Timeline* that covered the year 1986, the year of *Wrestlemania 2*. I could have *sworn* Steele told a story about confronting a cocky Bundy who was heard to say, "I'm a top guy around here."

In *my recollection,* Steele said, "No you're not. You had one good run here, you're not a top guy." Bundy's eyeballs flew out of his head, which was now red with fury. Before I could confirm this, he launched into an unholy tirade against Steele, the likes of which were probably indirectly responsible for his death just from having been put out into the universe. As Bundy was going berserk, I handed my iPhone to our production assistant, Adam, and asked him to go find the quote, I thought it may have even been in the trailer. Adam took the phone and walked out of the room as Bundy continued to lambaste Steele for having said that publicly, on-camera.

A few minutes later, Adam comes back with a rather worried look on his face. See! He found it! He's scared that Bundy will freak out after hearing

the clip directly, right out of Steele's mouth, to the ears of the thousands who watched it on YouTube. Then Adam spoke.

"Uh, good news and bad news...Steele does tell the story, but you should listen." He played the clip. It went as follows.

"I remember Bundy said, 'I'm a top guy around here.' Then Chief said, 'no you're not. You had one good run.'"

Chief, he said. Steele was quoting a story about Chief Jay Strongbow, another road agent who said this. Bundy looked at me, in shock and turned all his rage toward me. Well shit, he said the "Chief" part so damn low. Doesn't George Steele know how to tell a story at proper volume?

Chris does this thing where he plays mad all the time, and he's very convincing. To start with he's 6'5" and 400 lbs. When that action is looking down at you and giving you the business, you pay attention. The first time I was treated to this was at *Ring Roasts I.* We were just about to go out on-stage, the wrestlers and comics were lined up in the order I announced. I was at the door ready to head to the podium and kick off this bizarre gamble that was the wrestling roast. Bundy comes over while I was going over the intro with Bill Apter. He asked me something and I must've said, "Hang on a sec," and went back to Bill. When I was done with Bill, Bundy started with me.

"Listen pipsqueak," he said. He was right. 400 lbs. speaking to 180 lbs.–I know my role. "Don't you *EVER* blow me off like that again! I'm talking to you!" He actually grabs me by the collar and pulls me in closer, in case his spit all over my face was an indication that I was too far away and I couldn't hear him. I was truthfully more nervous about the show going well than being mauled by this giant egg.

"Chris," I said rolling my eyes and shaking my head. "Really? You can be pissed at me *after* the show but I have to go out there now and get this thing started." He just stared at me. A wildly exaggerated look of puzzlement came across his face. "You're not serious, right?" I said.

He laughed and shook me by the collar. "Gotcha Sean! The truth...you shit your pants, right?" If you were wondering what I was doing 60 seconds before walking out to the podium to kick-off the first wrestling roast, it was that.

Well, after I got Chris all worked up about George Steele he was doing that same routine, only this time I don't think it was a work.

“Jesus Christ, Sean!” he was yelling. “How could you *do* that?! That’s so irresponsible. That’s fucked up!” It was. I fucked up. I was shaking my head and I didn’t know what to say which, for me, is a rarity. “You made me go on and on about this guy...you *have* to cut that shit! Sean you better *swear* to me you will cut that!” I assured him I would and then joked that I did this with every talent so I had something to hold over their heads for the next negotiation. He was slow to calm down.

We started the show again and I plowed forward with the interview. After about a half hour, while talking about another thing entirely, he paused mid-story.

“You know it *is* kind of fucked up that Steele told that story on-camera about Strongbow saying that to me,” he said. Exactly! I agreed.

“It’s really irresponsible of him, I think,” I said exaggeratedly. “Even though it was Chief that was insulting you, did George *have* to tell it to the world?”

“That’s kinda true,” he said. Orca was back on my side.

Supercard would be a triumphant return for us as it was finally a new series that was representative of what we do. *Sports Illustrated* was doing a little piece on us for their website and the picture they ran with it was me and Bundy from *Supercard*. I sent it to Chris who promptly informed me that this is the kind of exposure you get from working with him and further evidence that he got robbed on the price we paid him. He’s great.

. . .

One series I was not singing lead for was *Back to the Territories* but there was no way I’d replace our host Jim Cornette for that show. He’s perfect and the show has become his in the wrestling world. People see that logo and they think Cornette. Jim is, among many things, a collector and historian of wrestling. He’s a great host for a series centered around the great wrestling territories of the past. He sits with a guest from that territory and they examine it front and back. It’s done well and we are currently starting our 4th season of it. The idea was a combination of a couple of things.

There are always little snippets, flashes of shows I carry in my head. I wanted to do a show about the wrestling arenas of yesteryear. I know, how the fuck is anyone staying awake for that? But I really wanted to explore

the identity and vibes of all these great venues. They were pro wrestling churches, each with its own unique congregations and stories. Would that be able to sustain a series? Maybe if we tried two per show, Anthony suggested. I talked with Bill Apter about doing it with us since he probably worked in every arena in the country as a journalist and photographer. I wanted him to get us photos also, since he had all the right connections. But he said his schedule was getting pretty full with, ironically, WWE. He didn't think he'd be able to commit fully.

The idea was kind of half-baked anyway. I wasn't feeling a strong flavor or format for that one. I had also wanted to cover the territories in some fashion. Anthony and I talked about a territory series that would also be able to incorporate discussion about the classic buildings and the things that went on in them. We talked about hosts. Well, we really just talked about *one* host.

Jim Cornette had called me earlier that year. We'd worked well together, though I was born above the Mason-Dixon line. Oddly, I really don't think Jim holds that against me, though. Jim called me and launched into an antacid-inducing rant about how one of our competitors had just fucked him somehow on some documentary, and they used footage they weren't supposed to, and they fucked some friend of his doing a documentary, and everyone fucked everyone.

"So because of all that shit I'm done working for these fucking assholes," he said. "I wanted to ask you, since we always do great shows and the fans like them, do you want to do some exclusive deal where basically I would only be able to do your shows?" It was intriguing. In theory, it would have been kind of cool to go back to the old studio system days of yore and make Jim Cornette a "contract player" at KC. I told him I didn't know, realistically, how much I'd be able to book him during a year. He'd done all of our series.

"I know, but what if you made me the host of *Timeline?* I've done the show and I know the format." I'd have to think about that.

I told him I never want to be responsible for a worker not taking a job and losing on a payday. Even if we paid him to sign some exclusivity deal, I'd be hesitant to enforce it. I'd feel badly about making a worker refuse a job. He had answer for that, too.

"Well, we can do a 'right of first refusal' where you would have to approve of anything else I did." I didn't ask how much he was looking for

to put his tongue on retainer. I talked about all of it with Anthony–the *Timeline* hosting, the concept of the retainer. The *Timeline* host spot wasn't a good idea because we'd be restricted in who we could work with. If Jim wasn't free on the day we had an opportunity to get Bret Hart, would we just let that Bret booking go? Having me host that series allowed us booking flexibility. It wasn't going to work with Corny.

I called Jim and told him we'd pass on owning him, but we had a new series we wanted him to host. I pitched him the territory series, nameless at that point, and he said he loved it. I committed to one season, 3 shows, to be released one per quarter. If it was well received, we'd bring him up and knock out another year's worth of episodes. He was in.

Back to the Territories was Anthony's title. We'd been working to get the format straight on the show, and I just casually wondered aloud about a title. Sometimes it comes right away, sometimes I don't really even think about it until later. I hadn't given it much thought and when Anthony said it, I knew it was perfect. All of the production design had basically taken care of itself since we were parodying the film. I would design the logo to be consistent with the film and I had a set constructed.

Anthony and Corny went to work constructing a master list of territories and potential guests for each of them. One thing we kept discussing was impartiality in covering a territory with a guest. If the guest were too close to the office of a particular territory, they may have some great stories, but would they really accept blame or be critical of their decisions? In many ways the owner of a territory would be the optimal guest, and in other ways it might hamper the retelling of the territory's history. It would vary by guest. There were some situations where it was more compelling to have that inside story even if there was some whitewashing that might happen. We would go on to have Greg Gagne, wrestler and son of AWA owner Verne, as the guest representing the AWA's place in territory history. Terry Funk was the guest when we covered the Funk family's territory in Amarillo, Texas. Outside of those two, to this date we've not had owners as guests on the series.

With Jim Cornette hosting we had the unique opportunity to use lots of classic memorabilia to augment these shows, since he had one of the largest personal collections. Jim supplies much of what you see cut into the episodes of *Back to the Territories* and when he doesn't have something he knows who does. Classic photos, news clippings, programs, magazine

covers, and other great moments in time are scanned into the shows to create ambience and compelling visuals.

Jim does a remarkable amount of research for each show. He comes to the set with pages and pages of it, including his great opening voice-overs. Corny didn't only put his name on a show and come to host. He really took ownership of it. *Back to the Territories* is a success for one reason–Jim Cornette. I'm glad I share the mic with him for Kayfabe Commentaries. Doing so allowed us to produce a series like that and add yet another component to playing our music. It's currently into its 4th season and is doing well.

After shooting Savio Vega's edition of *Back to the Territories,* which covered the Puerto Rico territory, Corny went upstairs to his hotel room for an hour of rest before our next taping. I went out to the front of the hotel to have a stretch and a cigar and stumbled onto lady luck in her sexiest lingerie. She was contoured in sleek silver, with a "DMC" on her chest, and her arms raised high at her sides. It was a magical moment. I may have even heard music. Might have been Huey Lewis.

There before me, was a restored Delorean in glistening, metallic silver. I was stunned. What are the odds? We bring Jim Cornette up *once a year* to shoot a run of these shows. I have seen a Delorean parked in the lot...well, never. And now the host of a *Back to the Future* parody is up here and the Delorean car from *Back to the Future* is parked across the entrance of the hotel. Nuts.

I went back inside the lobby and headed over to Christian, the front desk manager, because I didn't see Christopher Lloyd anywhere. I asked him who owned the Delorean and he said it was his. I had known Christian from our time at that resort in the past so I asked for permission to use his car for an impromptu video shoot in the parking lot. Permission was granted so I was immediately on the phone with Cornette. I interrupted his plans to sit on the bowl but told him it was imperative that he came downstairs.

When Corny walked outside his mouth was agape. "Holy shit," he said turning to me. "Where the hell did you get *this?"*

"Incredibly, it was here waiting for you." We played around in it for a bit and Corny and I worked out a rough promo for the *Back to the Territories* series. Anthony gave me a camera and Jim hopped in the car. I rolled and he got out and cut a promo in one take. So when you see that commercial and

you think we went to great lengths to acquire a classic car, you know it was a gift from the shoot interview gods.

The way that series works is Corny does all his own homework. He comes in and we start rolling with the guest. If there's anything for Corny and I to discuss we usually do that on the phone about a week before. Anthony and I sit at a table during the shoot and we make notes as the show goes on. He works in his pad and I work in mine. During a break, we will head over to Cornette and the guest and give our notes. They are usually some things more we feel need to be covered to fully color the episode. Anthony might tell Cornette to cover a specific arena, or some talent that came through the territory in a certain era. I might have something about paydays, or the guest covering their title loss. We head back to the table behind the cameras and we shoot the additional stuff. Eventually I will feel the end of the show has arrived. I'll get in Jim's line of sight and give him the signal to wrap-up. We shoot the pictures, record the opening voice over, and then that's a wrap. We have a great system down now and it usually goes smoothly. Usually.

We always go into our shoot weekend with a concise and easy schedule for Jim and it never pans out that way. For one reason or another, one of the other guests has a time demand that makes our lives rough. It makes mine particularly rough because Corny needs his rest and sleep and at times I have to tell him he won't be getting as much as he'd planned. I tell him to rest for the next 364 days. After promising him I won't, I sometimes have to have him work 'til 12 or 1 in the morning.

If you watch the Amarillo edition of *Back to the Territories* you might think Corny and Terry Funk are a little giddy. They were. Terry got into town Friday afternoon with the intention of shooting our show, and then heading to Queens, NY for an appearance at a night show. I was in touch with the promoter of the Queens show and the schedule we agreed to was Terry first working with us and being picked up at 6 p.m. by one of the promoter's drivers. I needed to get Terry in front of the cameras by 3:00 to ensure we got enough footage.

Terry got to our set around 3:30 which would still be enough time to get a good show in the can. I explained to Terry what the plan was–we would shoot, then he would be taken to Queens by the promoter of the wrestling show. Terry Funk, one of the toughest S.O.B.'s you'll ever meet, is also unintentionally hilarious. His 70 years on the planet, and his 50 years taking

punches to the head, have given Terry a comical confusion. He's kind, soft-spoken with the Texas drawl, but don't expect Terry to remember anything that he was told in the last two weeks. He'll regale you with stories of wrestling history but you can forget about finding out what he had for lunch today.

Terry asked me what his entire schedule was for that weekend. I had no idea. I was shooting a show with him today, he was being taken away to work a show that night and, I guess, he'd be shuttled all over the tri-state area afterwards by promoters and agents.

"I don't know Terry," I said. "Who booked you?" Terry leaned in and didn't waste a second even *trying* to think of the answer.

"I don't have a goddamn clue, Sean." We laughed. "I don't even know when I'm going home."

We signed the release and Corny and Terry chatted a bit. They talked old times, new times, travel, and Terry was heard to say, more than once, "Corny, I don't even know who I'm working for up here."

Just as I was ready to put the guys in their chairs on the set, I get a phone call from a number I don't know. It's the driver for the Queens promoter. He's here for Terry. He's also two and half hours early. I tell him to come around to the set so we can talk about this. He does and I tell him the timeline that I was given by his boss. He's shrugging, he has no clue. He's one of the underneath wrestlers doing a favor for the promoter. Was I really going to make him sit here and watch a show for two hours? I call the promoter and tell him his kid is early. I need this show and he was going to have to wait. Then I do the nice guy thing and ask if we let Terry go now, what was the fastest he could get Terry back to me that night? We both need our product, but his is a live event, whereas we are taping this. The dude said Terry could be out the door at 9:00 p.m. and he'd put him in a car and I'd have him at 10:00. That was a generous assumption since NYC traffic is awful on weekends. I asked both my talent if that's okay. Of course, Cornette is rosy about shooting until 1:00 a.m. Terry says that's fine and asks me who is picking him up tomorrow morning. I have no fucking idea. I tell him politely that all I know about is *our* shoot together.

"Did you fly me up here?" he asks. I'm half inclined to think this is a rib at this point. I tell him we will be delaying this shoot for a few hours and wish him luck. I ask him if he's wrestling in Queens, just signing autographs, or doing something else?

“Beats the shit out of me,” he says. He’s off. I encourage Cornette to go rest, have dinner, whatever. I would call him when I got the text that Funk was almost back in town. We all break. No one is amused. The final shoot of the day was to wrap at 6 p.m. Now they would be working until midnight or later.

We were even less amused when the jackoff promoter was not answering texts or phone calls from me. It was 9:00 and I was calling to confirm that Terry was being shuttled back. Nothing. Cornette is calling me asking if we are on track. I wished I had an answer. I told him I was trying to get the promoter.

The crew reassembled, expecting Terry soon. Cornette swung down around 9:15. I was keeping my distance from them because my mood was becoming dour. I know what’s happening and I’m not optimistic. 80% of the people that are buyers of talent in the independent wrestling world are absolute scumbags or mentally challenged. I knew I just got fucked.

I remembered that the wrestler that was dispatched to pick up Terry had called me, so I had his number also. I texted him and asked if Terry was on his way. He replied *No. He’s still here.*

Well, shit, that means we are already late. I told the kid to go ask the promoter with whom I made this earlier agreement when Terry was leaving.

The kid texted me, *He is keeping Terry until the show is over at 11:00.*

Motherfucker.

One day I will commit to being as much of a scumbag as others in this business, I guess. I do the nice guy thing too often. *Sure Konnan, here’s a $500 deposit. See you in June!* Or on this occasion, *Hey Mr Promoter, take Terry now so you can use him on-time, just have him back to me by 10:00.*

Cornette heads back to his room *again,* and on top of it all he learns the hotel restaurant has stopped serving for the night. He’s downright charming at this point.

I call the promoter one more time. The twat wouldn’t answer his phone. I left a voicemail he likely deleted. But in the event he listened, I wanted him to know the consequences that awaited him.

“Hey,” I started. “This is the asshole who agreed to let Terry Funk leave my set early so you could have him on time. If this is the asshole who said he’d be taken back to me at nine then I’d like to thank you for teaching me a lesson about being professional and courteous to another business owner. I’ll remember never to do that again and instead be two-bit, hack

douchebag. Just remember one thing...I *will* fuck you. I have a great memory and it lasts a long time. Somewhere, somehow I will have the opportunity to fuck you. And I look forward to doing it."

I hung up and tossed my phone on a table and told everyone to head out until 11:30 or so. I was furious and exhausted. I laid down in the corner, tried to meditate or sleep, whichever worked first.

At 11:30 I buzzed. It was the driver kid. *Hey we are heading out.*

I replied, *Tell your boss to listen to his phone.*

Terry got to us around 1:00 a.m. We all reassembled in the breakout room to shoot. Cornette was ready, Terry was still all smiles, and if you thought Terry was a little directionless when he *wasn't* awake and working for around 20 hours, you should've seen him that night. Cornette and Terry had a laugh about not being able to do this stuff at this hour anymore. Terry asked Cornette if he knew when he was leaving for home. Cornette burst out laughing.

"Terry, I don't even know when *I'm* leaving anymore, shit got so messed up." Terry turned to me.

"Sean, do you know when I'm flyin' home?" he asked.

I assured him that I still did not, and I still was not the one who arranged these bookings for him.

"I think I'm goin' back tomorrow." Terry said. Maybe he was, though I thought someone mentioned he was working all day Saturday and being flown back Sunday. Who cares? We need a *Back to the Territories* in the can!

The guys got to work and I don't know how they managed to keep it going for two hours but they did it. I'd worked marathon days, shooting three shows–8 or 9 hours of talking and listening and when you get to midnight or 1 am it's surreal. It doesn't even feel like you're a part of the discussion. You're pulling out every trick in the book to stay engaged and not have your face project *I don't care about what you're saying I just need to get the fuck to bed.*

At some points in the interview they cackled like schoolgirls. The silliness and delirium from the long, late shoot took over. Near the end of the show, after recounting the history of the Amarillo territory and the ridiculous behaviors of a life on the road, Terry looks over at the camera and comes to the realization, "I've had such a stupid life." Everyone falls out of their chairs. It was a classic moment and the whole show was great.

The following night, Saturday, was the night that Anthony and I drove down to the wrestling show in central Jersey to steal Kevin Nash from the sideways promoter that tried to fuck us on the *Bombshells* show. (A different guy from the Queens show with Terry the night before. They're all over, like roaches.) While I was waiting for Nash to finish up signing autographs with Scott Hall, who loudly reprimanded me for saying hello to Kevin before him, I wandered the area set up for talent to sign for fans. I'm milling about the Jersey shore rock club as talent are wrapping up and heading to the dressing room, when I bump into Terry Funk. I thank him for last night and apologize again for the time of the shoot.

"That's fine, it was good seein' Corny." The room was pretty loud. He leaned. "Hey, do you know when I'm goin' home?" I looked up at him.

"Maybe you're *not* going home, Terry."

"It's sure as hell startin' to look that way," he said as I cracked up. "I don't even know who the hell booked me on this damn deal. Was it you?"

Terry Funk is an absolute joy to be around.

Producing the *Back to the Territories* series is a cooperative effort between Jim Cornette and us. After we put the *Back to the Territories* episodes in the can, I send Cornette a rough cut of each so he can prepare the b-roll graphics. I try and get him the rough cut a couple of months before release. I said I "try" because sometimes more pressing editing needs attention, like the show that's coming out in a week and the graphics and color correction are making the render take a whole day. Sometimes shit happens.

One time I sent Corny the rough cut with a truly unreasonably short deadline, something like three weeks until release. In that time he would have to watch the show, make graphics notes with timecode noted, find memorabilia, have it scanned and emailed to me by Stacey. Forget technology for Jim. Corny doesn't do scanners, and Google Drive is something Ahmed Johnson does with a car.

This was just after Cornette appeared on a Kevin Dunn produced *WWE Hall of Fame* show, incredibly enough. I emailed him as soon as he got back from the *Hall of Fame* and *Wrestlemania* shows and told him about this crunch-time deadline. He wrote me back and thanked me for the rib and told me he'd get on it as soon as he could. I wrote him back and told him I had the TV on the other night and I thanked *him* for the rib.

The truth is that no matter *how early* I get the cut to Corny, there is always a calamity that prevents him from getting to it until the absolute last minute. Here is a comprehensive list of the excuses Jim has given me for late returns on graphics notes and files. I just went through my email inbox so these are legit, and exact quotes:

- Burnt out A/C fan motor with a double overtime bill to repair on Easter weekend;
- Bad compressor in refrigerator;
- Pest control attack on the mice in the crawlspace;
- Stacey delayed/distracted by a bag left at Walmart checkout counter;
- Yard work and fall chores;
- Ransacked the vault and cannot find a decent picture of Fritz Von Erich; (Is there one?)
- Computer froze up and is in the shop; (I love 'the shop.' Right next to the Buick.)
- New credits to come, wrong Polish guy from Detroit listed in prior email;

You could live for 100 years and you'll never meet anyone like Jim Cornette. Don't waste time trying to figure out where the man ends and the gimmick begins. It's all mixed up in a huge stew and served in a cafe on a planet all his own. That's not a negative, necessarily. That speaks to his authenticity. I say "not a negative necessarily" because there have been a handful of people that have come up against that authenticity and had problems. Vince Russo is one. Santino Marella is another.

I have been very lucky to have Jim as a collaborator for this series. Jim's obsessive preparedness is a gift for an employer. I am tickled when I see that amount of research he does for *every* show he has done with us, from the first time I met him on *Guest Booker.* As a producer, Jim Cornette makes my life easier. As a host, Jim Cornette makes my life easier. As a director, Jim Cornette makes my life easier. As an owner, Jim Cornette makes my life easier.

I know Jim's resurgence in popularity was largely because of the work we did together. We call it the "John Travolta Effect." We sometimes know how to use a talent in so perfect a way, that the world sees renewed value in them, just like when Quentin Tarantino cast John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction.*

As much as we may have done to spark that renewed love of a loquacious man-on-the-edge, it was really Jim that did it all on his own. Jim is so quick on his feet that he could walk into a *Guest Booker* and wing it. He doesn't need to prepare. He's one of the brightest guys in the business and he could sit down and book his ass off. Yet, Jim lives by a code that is somewhere near the city line of work ethic and just over the border of obsessive compulsive. It's a place that makes him work like a dog on preparation before he takes our money to sit down and talk for three or four hours. I appreciate that. I don't know how much is an ingrained work ethic versus a disorder, but to me it's a code whereby if he's being paid to do a job, then goddamn it, he's gonna do it right. What a blessing it must have been for Vince McMahon and Dixie Carter to have someone like that on their payroll. I hope they appreciated it as much as I do.

. . .

The seas ahead are pretty choppy. The podcast market and the culture of media sharing have created a tidal wave that has crashed down on content providers, and producers our size are the hardest hit. When the storm came in, our insulation against its effect was the uniqueness of our content. It didn't matter to me that WWE Network was trying to emulate the shoot interview. They still can't tell the truth and they're too afraid to offend shareholders. The glut of wrestling podcasts are an unproven market at this point. How many will go the distance? How many will generate money and how many people will bother producing them if they don't?

As the co-owner of a business I could drive myself nuts if I considered everything coming over the hill a threat. I'm better served when I focus on programming and making sure we get good shows to the people. I easily get lost in the business end of things and I have to remind myself to stay open creatively. I have to make sure I am spending as much time caring about programming and content as I am preparing quarterly presentations and analyzing sales and viewership data. It sounds rudimentary but it's not. It's easy to get swallowed up by numbers, the tax maze that comes with running a small business, and other cold stuff. To a degree, you do have to be obsessive about the business. But it's important to remember why you're here in the first place. You have to remember you make something you love, something you're amused by, something you're a fan of. I forget that.

Sometimes I get a fan email at just the right time. Nowadays, with social media, people's opinions are instant and on full display. People flippantly post and tweet whatever the hell pops into their head. It somewhat invalidates the medium. But when a fan takes the time to open the email and type their appreciation for our shows, it means so much. And sometimes it hits my inbox on a day that I have forgotten that we even make art.

I have to believe that if we keep doing what we do well and playing *our* music, then the fans will keep coming. Podcasts will come and go. We know how to speak to people's passions. Some things are evergreen.

Jesus, listen to me. I sound like James fucking Joyce.

I interview wrestlers! We talk about their pretending to have won or lost, been hurt or delivered injury, and we call it "history." I sometimes get threatened by grown men who choose to shoot horse testosterone into their ass cheeks. I sit on-camera and garner information for thousands of viewers–not about war, immigration policy, or tax relief, but rather I find myself saying things like "you won the World Title by throwing a fireball in his face after his snake attacked you."

Still and all, as silly as it may all seem, we recreate the past for viewers and fans. We take that date, or that wrestler, and we shine a spotlight, and some fan for whom that childhood memory is very important gets transported back. They become validated because that which was important to them, is important enough to be covered on our production. Wrestlers talk with someone who understands the intricacies of their business and respects it. They are asked insightful questions and given the opportunity to consider their sport's history and comment on it. We have the wrestlers invite the fans on a ride inside that history, with their idols and heroes of yesteryear beside them. We are in the business of tribute and honor.

And sometimes it's just a discussion about the size of Virgil's dick.